

THE BIGGEST UPCOMING GAMES OF 2022



NORTH
AMERICAN
EDITION

PC GAMER®

FULL REVIEW

HALO INFINITE

THE CAMPAIGN AND
THE CONTROVERSY

THE SECOND COMING OF DARK SOULS

ELDEN RING™

⌘ HANDS-ON ACROSS A
HUGE OPEN WORLD

⌘ EVERYTHING YOU
NEED TO KNOW

⌘ THE SECRETS OF
THE NEW LORE

FUTURE

ISSUE 354

HARDWARE

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THE ULTIMATE
BUYER'S GUIDE



COMPANY OF HEROES 3

GOING TO WAR IN
MULTIPLAYER



INTEL I5 12600K

THE KILLER CPU
YOUR PC NEEDS

DUNE



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PC GAMER

WELCOME

“WE’VE SEEN A SETTING OF WONDERFULLY AMBITIOUS SCALE”



The thing that wowed me when I first played *Dark Souls* wasn't the brutal combat, mysterious story, or bleak aesthetic. It was the level design—the way its areas layered one upon another, constantly reinforcing how all the pieces fit together.

So I'm fascinated to see how FromSoftware bring those sensibilities to a vast open world for *Elden Ring*. Even in our hands-on time so far, we've seen a setting of wonderfully ambitious scale—and in our cover feature, we've delved into every corner we can.

ROBIN VALENTINE

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This month

Had his annual brush with insanity courtesy of the Christmas short deadline. Apologies for any weirdness within.

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This month

Spent more time with the new Intel CPU than is healthy. Can love bloom, even on a motherboard?



HARRY SHEPHERD

Twitter
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This month

Learned the importance of eating well and getting enough sleep. Only in *Skyrim*, however.



CHRIS LIVINGSTON

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This month

Found a way to bring his love of fishing in games to *Crusader Kings 3*.



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This month

Looked back on 2021, in order to complain about too many RPGs looking back even further.

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Amidst the chaos of Ubisoft's open world design, is it possible to just have a peaceful sight-seeing holiday (and not die of malaria in the process)?

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TITAN FALLS

After years of struggling against DDoS attacks, **TITANFALL** is being removed from sale

After years of struggling to combat hacks and DDoS attacks that at times have rendered *Titanfall* unplayable, Respawn Entertainment has decided it's time to throw in the towel. The studio said in a statement that it has stopped all sales of the game, and will remove it from subscription services on March 1, 2022.

The decision to end *Titanfall* sales follows a back-and-forth battle with hackers that dates to 2019, resulting in a 'mostly negative' user review rating for the game on Steam. Players

The news comes alongside changes at the top, with Respawn cofounder Chad Grenier, who's also game director on *Apex Legends*, leaving the studio.

sometimes overstate a given game's 'hacker' problem, but in this case it was absolutely endemic. There were flashes of hope earlier this year—Respawn told players that "help is coming" in April—but by mid-May the situation was as bad as ever, and in mid-July Respawn community coordinator Jason Garza

ONLY "ONE OR TWO PEOPLE" WERE STILL WORKING ON TITANFALL SUPPORT

acknowledged that the demands of *Apex Legends* meant that only "one or two people" were still working on *Titanfall* support.

"Rest assured, *Titanfall* is core to Respawn's DNA and this incredible universe will continue," the studio said. "Today in *Titanfall 2* and *Apex Legends*, and in the future. This franchise is a north star for the calibre of experiences we will continue to create here at Respawn."

Respawn didn't say why exactly the game is being removed from sale, but given the tiny number of people still trying to play—today's peak concurrent player count on Steam is seven, and it's probably safe to

DICE ROLL

FUTURE OF BATTLEFIELD



EA has let the public in on its plans to expand the *Battle*-verse with story-driven content. *Halo* and *CoD* veterans are involved, so hope for a smashing solo campaign. ■ **JP**



ERROR WALKING

TO THE MOON



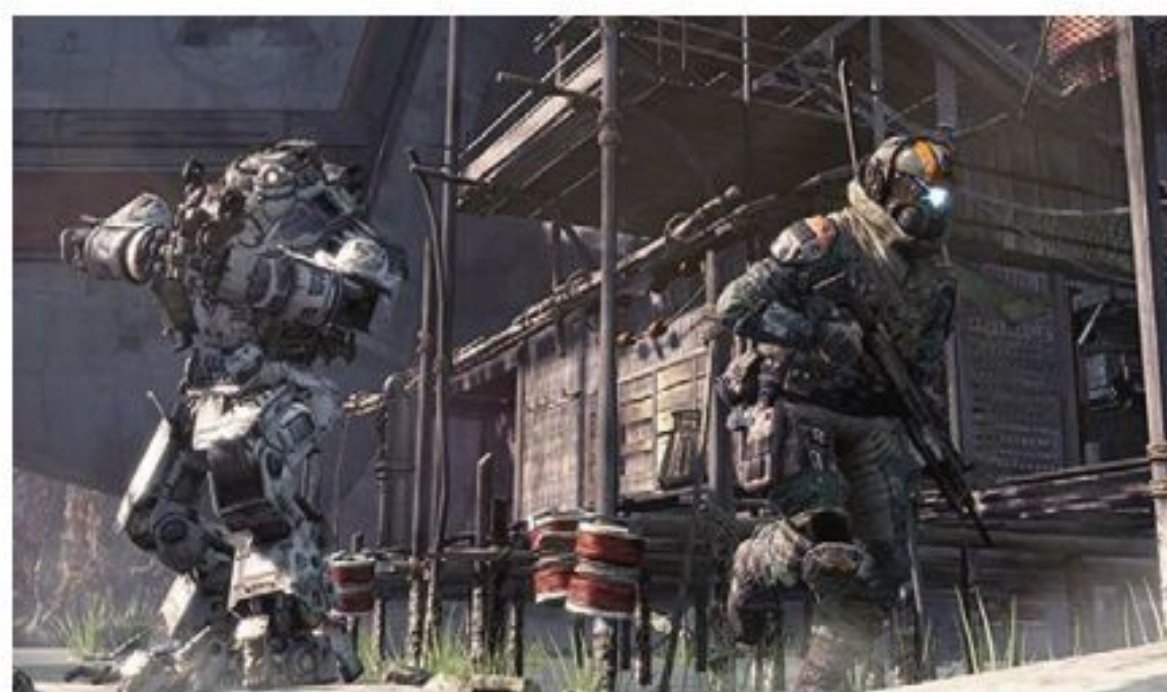
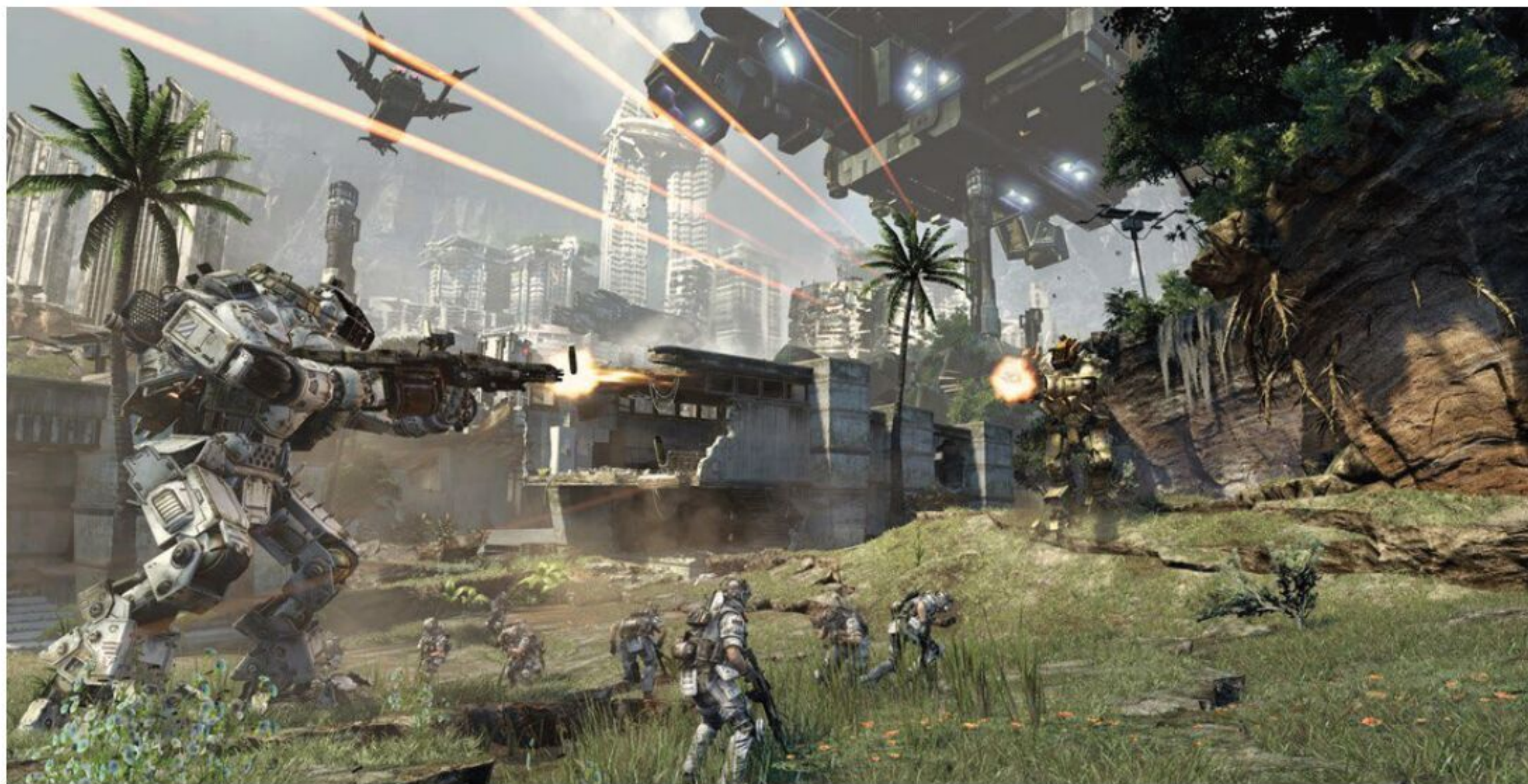
Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker saw a 95,150 concurrent players on Steam, but the launch was plagued by errors and disconnects. Who knew getting to the moon would be this hard? ■ **MT**

SHIFTING REALITIES

OCULUS REBRAND



Andrew Bosworth, Meta's VP of AR/VR, notes a shift from the Oculus brand by way of simplifying Meta's brand architecture. From now, the Oculus Quest will be the Meta Quest. ■ **KW**



Respawn said virtually the same thing when it denied that *Titanfall 3* is in development earlier this year, "*Titanfall* is the very core of our DNA."

assume the Origin numbers are similar—the reasonable guess is that it's just not worth the effort required to keep up the fight against hackers.

RESPAWN RATES

The studio's priority is clearly and understandably *Apex Legends*, the ongoing hit battle royale, which also happens to be set in the *Titanfall* universe and is thus, technically at least, part of the 'franchise.'

Titanfall is effectively finished, then, but *Titanfall 2* will persevere. It also suffers from serious DDoS and hacking problems, but unlike the original *Titanfall* it also includes an absolutely outstanding campaign and is still worth a pickup as a singleplayer game.

It's undeniably strange to see a game that was such a big deal and released a mere seven years ago just... disappear. Whatever the rationale, and of course servers cost money, it's like a book being out-of-print. It makes an interesting contrast to Rockstar's recent about-face with the original 3D *Grand Theft Auto* games: The publisher removed them from sale when the remastered *GTA Trilogy* was released. Then it turned out, as reported last issue, that the *Trilogy* had serious issues: And the originals were returned to sale with an apology.

Andy Chalk

Highs & Lows



HIGHS

Riot act

A *League of Legends* rhythm game and an RPG surprise-launched on the same day.

Pass it on

Xbox Game Pass on PC has hidden games, including *Crysis*.

Nintendo bashes Bowser (again)

52 year-old Doug Bowser, has pled guilty to piracy-related charge, but now has a new civil suit against him.

War never changes

Battlefield 2042 launched into a wave of community negativity—though it isn't unusual for the series.

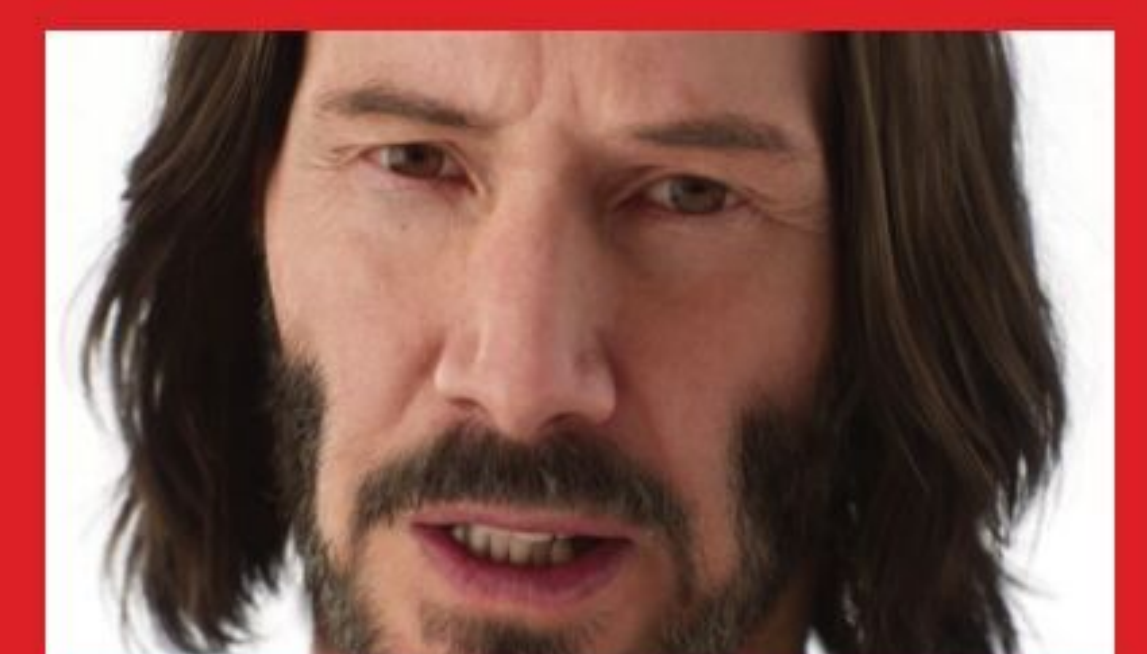
The Matrix Sleeps

Epic's been working on *The Matrix Awakens* and... it's only on consoles.

Old problems

New World has had a slightly torrid time of it recently with duping glitches. Now, it's battling an invasion of bots.

LOWS



Positive Influence

INSPIRATIONS AND CONNECTIONS IN GAMES

GENERATION GAME

FAR CRY 6's narrative director talks Caribbean revolution and criticism

If you're yet to start *Far Cry 6*, I have a recommendation for you. Once you're on the far side of its tutorial—and find yourself sitting between the pincers of a vast, curved Caribbean island named Yara—head straight east to El Este. There, the farms harbor teenage terrorists, and the mountain has become an old people's home for former revolutionaries.

It's the perfect staging ground for inter-generational conversation and conflict. A place where the elderly have plenty to teach, but are too tired to pass it on—and the young have righteous anger, but no desire to listen. As protagonist Dani, your job is to bridge the generational gap, connecting student killers with the jaded veterans. It's a process that's clumsy and often funny—a relatable tragicomedy for anyone old enough to see the familiar arc of the human condition.

"We often paint revolutionary movements in media as one big entity," narrative director Navid Khavari explains to me. "It couldn't be further from the truth. There are so many facets involved, whether it's uniting opposing forces for one common goal or giving those who want to sit on the sidelines a reason to believe there is a fight that needs them. And in the case of El Este, convincing those from a previous generation that this time things could really change."

El Este's story forms part of a wider message in *Far Cry 6*, gleaned from Ubisoft's research into revolutionary movements—that progress is not a straight line, and that setbacks are inevitable. In one striking early dialogue, Libertad leader Clara García tells Dani that she doesn't expect Yara's first elected leader to last long. Yara has won its freedom before, within living memory—and lost it too.

"If you look throughout history, whether in Latin America or around the world, during the time of revolution it is incredibly difficult to predict what will happen once they're over," Khavari says. "And once the reality of a post-revolutionary future sets in, whoever is still standing will be in incredible danger, whether they're in charge or not. Clara is a visionary but also a pragmatist. Two steps forward, one step back."

LONG TAIL

Khavari's writers spoke to scholars and former fighters, and clearly took their duty to revolutionary history seriously. Nevertheless, *Far Cry 6* has been criticized for its tone, with some suggesting that a respectful reflection on dictatorship shouldn't coexist with a Macarena gun and chicken companion. This kind of clash isn't new for Khavari, who previously led the narrative team behind *Far Cry 5*'s Whitetail Mountains region.

"This definitely is a challenge for any team developing a *Far Cry* story," he says. "What I do know is our team did absolutely everything in our power to try and tell a meaningful story, while also staying true to the hyper-real elements of the franchise."

One longtime characteristic of *Far Cry*, Khavari points out, is that it doesn't encroach on how players choose to play. "Now we wanted to leave that freedom," he says. "But at the same time, if you choose to focus on the story and equip the tools that will make you feel more like a grounded revolutionary, it's there waiting for you."

Elsewhere, Latin American players have complained about a trope where characters 'dip into' Spanish mid-sentence when speaking English. "It was something we discussed with a multitude of members of the team and experts who worked with us," Khavari says. "For example, there are those from Latin American countries who would tell us they often do dip in and out of Spanish and English in everyday conversation... What I would say is that trying to get the Spanish and authenticity right was a real concerted effort over several years."

Whether *Far Cry 6* hits its mark is for players to decide. But it's clear that, for Khavari, every decision comes back to doing justice to the guerilla revolution story. "It would be next to impossible to tell that story," he says, "without having a player character that can express an opinion on the cause they are fighting for." ■

Jeremy Peel

OPEN BOOK

Khavari's tips on writing for Assassin's Creed and Far Cry

1 Don't get too caught up in the scale of the series that you're working with. "If that happens it's like working with one hand tied behind your back."

2 Try looking for a new perspective to bring to the playground you're in "while respecting the DNA of what came before" so things don't get all jumbled.

3 Understand that story is part of a vast spectrum of what makes games tick, "Constant collaboration and pulling back to look at the bigger picture is essential."

“WHOEVER IS STILL STANDING WILL BE IN INCREDIBLE DANGER”



Chorizo the dog has been a focal point for complaints about *Far Cry 6*'s use of Spanish.



LEFT: Blending into urban spaces is simple, but novel in a series traditionally set outside.





DNA Tracing

ETERNAL LINEAGES EXPLORED

**THE WITCHER TOOK FIVE
YEARS AND MORE FUNDING
THAN THE BUSINESS
STRICTLY HAD TO FINISH**

DISC WORLD

How **CD PROJEKT RED** climbed to the top of the RPG mountain—and slipped

CD Projekt Red is a phenomenon that could only have occurred in Poland—and only, really, in the '90s. It's a time that explains more than the studio's ludicrously anachronistic title. This was not just the golden age of the CD-ROM, but the golden age of piracy, too—at least in the former Eastern Bloc. Under communist rule, without legitimate access to Western retailers or any copyright law to speak of, Polish PC gaming culture grew in the street markets, where games were sold for \$3 a pop—according to the excellent reporting of Eurogamer's resident *Witcher* scholar, Robert Purchase.

As the iron curtain lifted, local companies—including a pair of skinny young hopefuls named Marcin Iwiński and Michał Kiciński—could finally, legally import and sell the biggest games from around the world. But in doing so they would have to compete with the Captain Kidds and Calico Jacks who had thrived in their stead.

For its vanguard release, the nascent CD Projekt picked Bioware's *Baldur's Gate*. In its favor was the fact that it came on five discs, reducing the ability of pirates to sell it cheaply. And since it was an RPG, it was built around words, which CD Projekt could translate in full—casting renowned local actors in some of the key roles.

Rounding out the value proposition was every luxury you could dream of in a big box PC game at the time: a parchment map, an audio CD, and a D&D rulebook. Despite the low-price competition, sales were stellar, and CD Projekt learned its founding principle—to overdeliver.

BALD DEBUT

Baldur's Gate gave CD Projekt more than its first sales success, of course. It gave the company a blueprint for its own development efforts. During that localization process, it had internalized the Sword Coast's iron ore crises and dark omens; the way *Baldur's Gate* blends social and economic problems with matters of the gods and asks you to sort through the mess. *The Witcher* took five years and more funding than the business strictly had to finish, but Bioware's influence was clear to see in the result.

CD Projekt knew Greg Zeschuk and Ray Muzyka well enough to license the Aurora engine, and the two doctors

even lent their Polish cousins a corner of their booth at E3. (Make no mistake, Bioware got behind *The Witcher*; I first saw Geralt when a dramatic piece of art appeared in the launcher for *Neverwinter Nights*, a space otherwise reserved purely for that game's expansions and DLC.)

With the benefit of half a decade's visual and atmospheric advancements, CD Projekt put *Neverwinter Nights*' tech to more powerful use than Bioware could have. Pulling the once-isometric camera close to Geralt's shoulder, it situated players among the filth and flora of Vizima. And there was something worth zooming in for: Though *The Witcher* had its share of jank, it also possessed unusual flair for its genre.

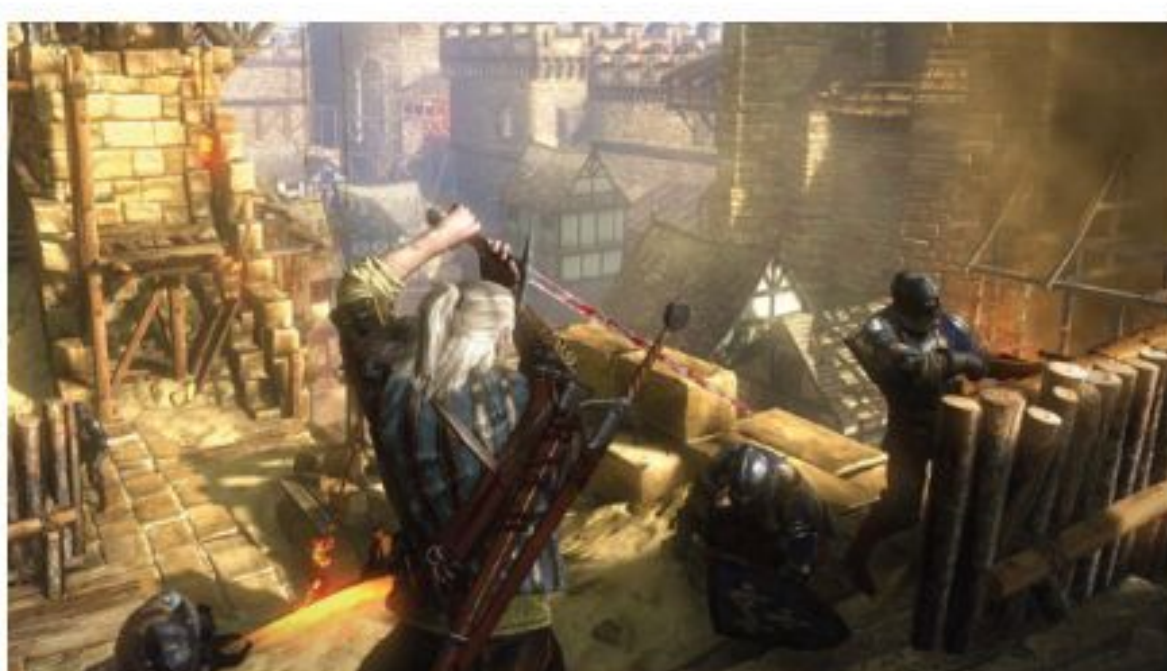
Since the shift to 3D, Western RPG fans had resigned themselves to stiff animations and clunky conversations—the trade-offs for scale and reactivity. Yet somehow, despite its lack of pedigree and staff of former bankers and doctors, CD Projekt upped the standard. None of its peers could offer the sight of a pirouetting Geralt severing a drowner's head from its dank blue shoulders—leaving the monster to ragdoll down an embankment into the rain-pounded river from whence it came.

LESSER EVILS

Even when Bioware put out *Dragon Age: Origins* two years later—its own spiritual sequel to the D&D games of the '90s—it failed to match *The Witcher* for its sense of danger in the wilderness, a trait *Baldur's Gate* had exemplified a decade before. It was the first time CD Projekt had out-Bioware'd its mentors, and wouldn't be the last.

Just look at the Grey Wardens. In retrospect, *Dragon Age*'s warrior order is a clear echo of Geralt's: a gaggle of lonely monster hunters, maligned by wider society, subjected to a strange cocktail during training that kills off most initiates and leaves just a handful of elite mutants. >>

BELOW: Sapkowski would describe that top as a 'jerkin'. He once sold furs for a living, don't you know.



TAVERN DISTRACTION

A potted history of Witcher minigames



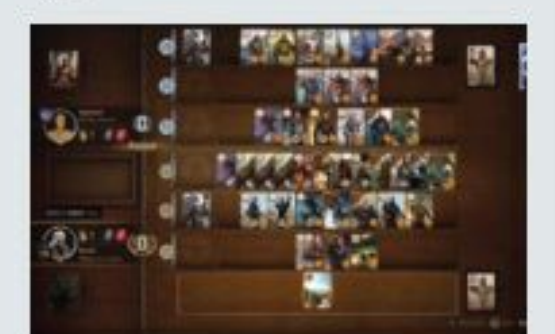
DICE POKER

The citizens of Vizima go wild for this game of chance—presumably because it can bag them loads of orens, not because it's particularly deep or satisfying to play.



ARM WRESTLING

By *The Witcher 2*, downtime had got physical. This is a *Fable*-esque matter of finesse and motor control. Don't worry, Geralt provides all the strength.



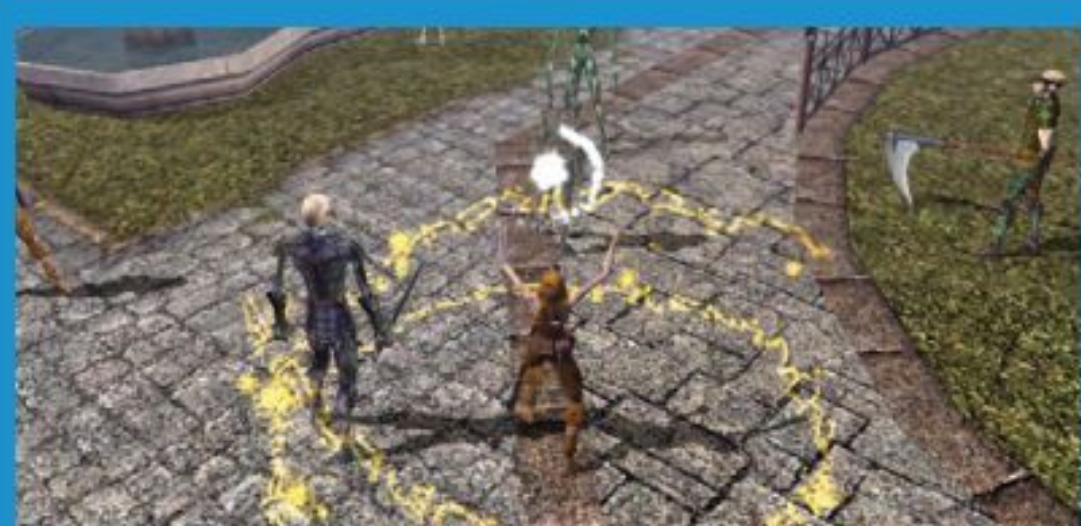
GWENT

So much fun it spawned a standalone release, this three-laned card game reflects the world around it—in that, in the event of a draw, Nilfgaard always wins.

DNA Tracing



BALDUR'S GATE
The first CRPG as we know them today.



NEVERWINTER NIGHTS
Came with a robust, easy-to-use adventure toolset.



THE WITCHER
Combined Bioware's tech with Slavic folklore.



THE WITCHER 2: ASSASSINS OF KINGS
Continued the series with flair.



THE WITCHER 3: WILD HUNT
Went open world. Won over the planet.



CYBERPUNK 2077
A high profile launch disaster, still being fixed today.



GWENT: THE WITCHER CARD GAME
Couldn't quite rival *Hearthstone*.



THRONEBREAKER: THE WITCHER TALES
A full Gwent-based RPG.

THIN RED LINE

CD Projekt's CV of projects

KEY

■ CD Projekt Red

■ Bioware

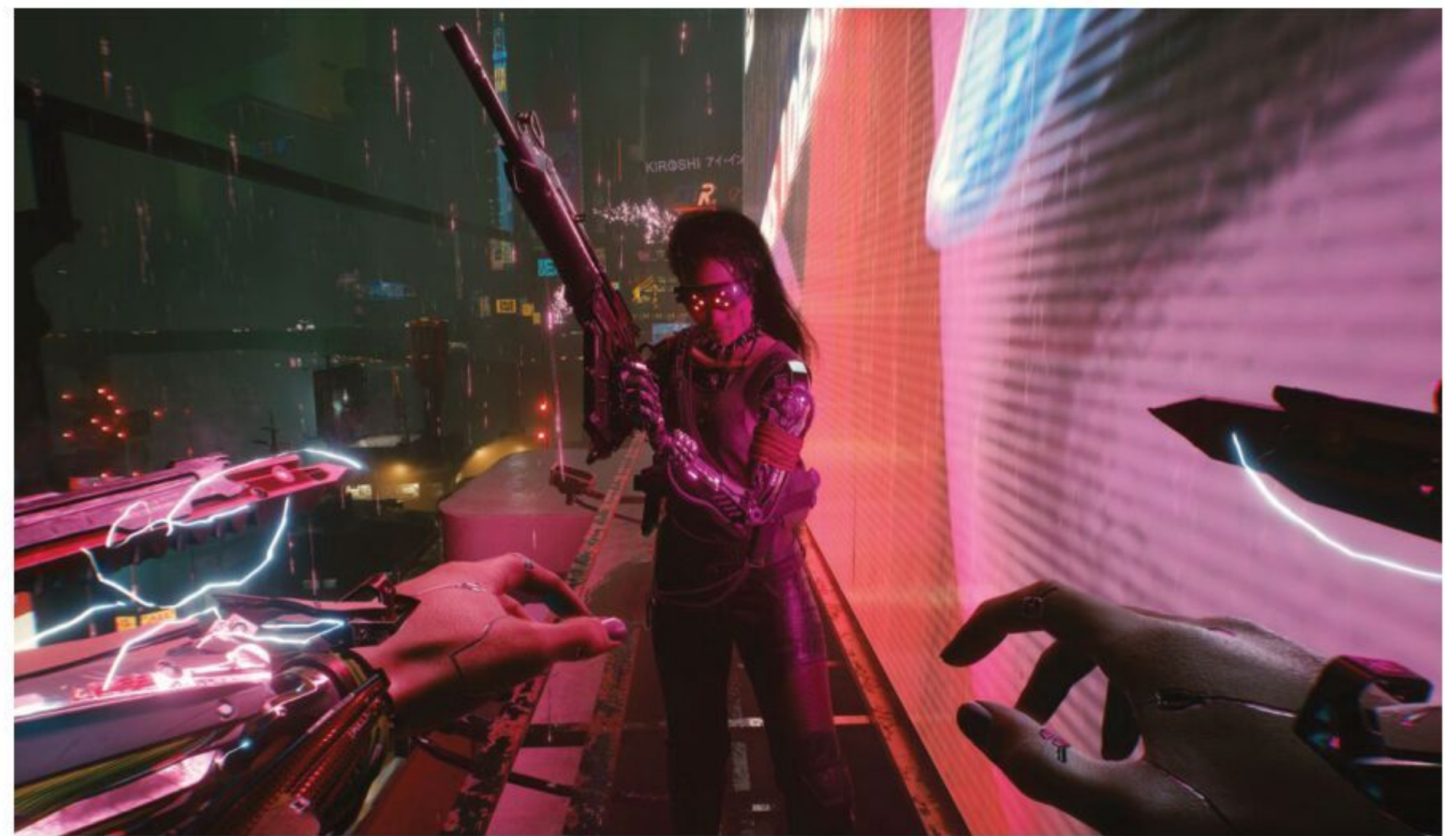
» Then there are its elves, an impoverished subclass eking out an existence in the margins of a dominant human civilization. Bioware was shooting for a darker D&D that now reads like *The Witcher* with the license number scratched off; CD Projekt, by contrast, had the advantage of working from source material that was already worshipped in Eastern Europe.

Andrzej Sapkowski's stories had begun as comically twisted fairy tales, but become part of the canon of Polish fantasy—a world clawed at by ghouls and strigas, for a country with more than its fair share of ghosts after occupation during the Second World War. By 2007, videogame culture was perfectly poised for fiction that sneered at the self-aggrandisement of knights and met supposed saintliness with suspicion. After *Fable* and *Knights of the Old Republic*, RPG fans were ready to be plunged into the fog of the morally grey.

KER-PUNK

It wouldn't be true to say that CD Projekt matched Sapkowski for wit or winding plotlines straight away—that first game most often comes off as faithful imitation, ripping common themes and quotes about lesser evils straight from the books. But over two sequels, the studio has proven its talent for adaptation, even capturing the will-they-won't-they-kill-each-other romantic entanglement of Geralt and the witch Yennefer. Like Sapkowski's originals, CD Projekt's stories are brilliantly soapy—a home to sentimentalism, screaming melodrama, and hot baths. The developer dressed the bed which Netflix now rolls around in, luxuriating in worldwide acclaim for anything *Witcher*-related.

With each successive *Witcher* game, CD Projekt reinforced its rule of overdelivering—putting out free enhanced editions many months after release at great



ABOVE: Wallrunning was a casualty of *Cyberpunk*'s pained development.

expense, long before service games made such additions the norm. It built a reputation for generosity you can now see mimicked by another ascendent RPG developer, Larian.

Cyberpunk should have been the perfect next project—another long-established license from another medium, stuffed with peculiarities for CD Projekt to nail in its unfailingly reverent way. Yet in the years of anticipation that preceded *Cyberpunk 2077*'s release, the studio sold the world on an impossible combination of *The Witcher*, *Deus Ex*, and *GTA*. With expectations set to an all-time industry high, the studio failed to live up to its promises for the first time—and in front of the largest crowd.

CD Projekt will return to greatness—quite possibly with *The Witcher 4*. But as the studio licks its wounds, you suspect it will never again forget its first principle: To overdeliver. And, just as crucially, to underpromise. ■

CYBERPUNK SHOULD HAVE BEEN THE PERFECT NEXT PROJECT



Geralt's magical signs converted perfectly into a system of videogame powers.

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THE BIG

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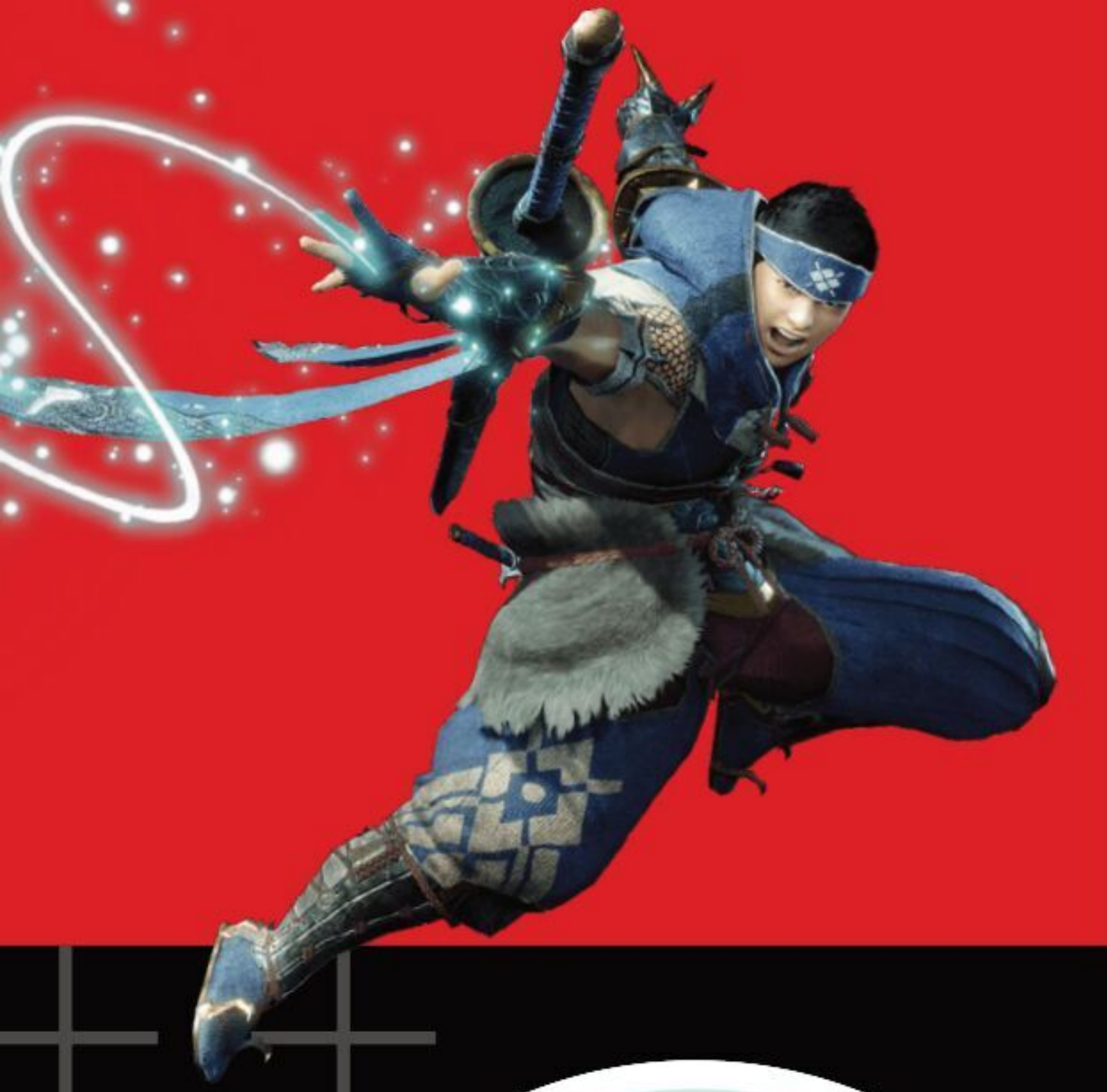
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Fraser Brown
Robin Valentine
Luke Kemp
Ben Tyrer
Robert Zak
Ted Litchfield
Samantha Greer

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There's a
packed year
for PC gaming
ahead of us



2022



PREVIEW



COMPANY OF HEROES 3

RELEASE 2022 | DEV Relic Entertainment | PUB Sega | LINK community.companyofheroes.com

Headling into *Company of Heroes 3*'s multiplayer pre-alpha, I've got a plan. "I'll start with a comp stomp," I tell

Relic, hoping to nab myself an easy victory in an AI skirmish. I spend most of this first match fighting with the AI over a single capture point in a village square that rapidly becomes unrecognizable as the ground is turned into craters.

I'm playing as the USF Airborne battlegroup, one of two currently available for the US faction, and one of four in the build I'm playing. While the singleplayer campaign lets you build your forces out of whatever companies and detachments you want, even creating hybrids with US, UK, and Commonwealth units, the multiplayer battlegroups are preset fighting forces with broad roles that favor different playstyles.

The Airborne battlegroup is, naturally, all about planes, whether they're dropping off paratroopers and guns, or going on bombing and strafing runs. I've already unlocked the paratrooper ability, and this helps me to speed up reinforcements after losing everyone in an earlier scuffle. The plane gets blown to smithereens, the wreckage falling right next to my base, but all the troops make it out in time. Sadly, they get taken out by some armored vehicles. While I try to recover, my enemy takes more territory, fattens up its economy, and starts bringing in tanks. I'm screwed.

For the second battle, I switch sides, and take command of the German Breakthrough battlegroup. It's my turn to scare everyone with some big tanks. I've got a developer helping me out this time, and we're facing another dev and their AI companion. My confidence is

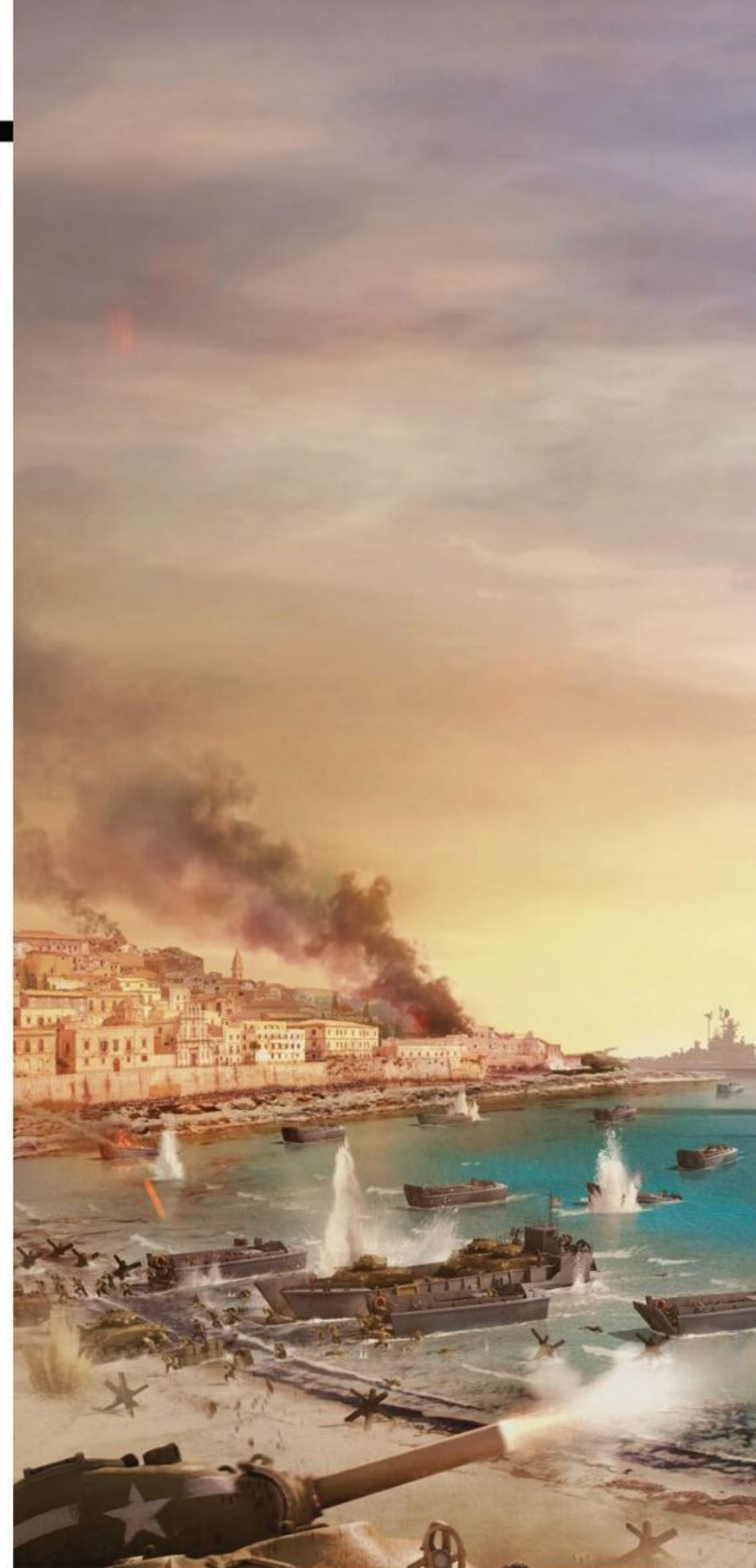
bolstered by a strong start, the source of which is an unarmed recon bike that's able to capture territory, unlike most vehicles. With plenty of resources, I'm able to put together a strong force and then get into it in the center of the map, where we're all fighting over a victory point.

We have the high ground, giving us a handy bonus, and despite the intensity of the fight, we manage to hold the enemy back, their bodies and wrecked vehicles littering the bridge below us. Expecting another attack, I heal up via my ally's medical truck, and then secure the area by turning a building into a forward outpost where I'm able to recruit more troops.

TIGER, TIGER...

Keeping troops alive and killing rewards you with veterancy, which works a bit differently in *Company of Heroes 3*, with each faction getting distinct advantages. For the US forces, you get two veterancy specialization options per unit, but with the Germans it depends on what Field Marshal you select. They get three of them, each conferring unique upgrades, abilities, and veterancy bonuses.

The enemy outsmarts us and manages to get behind us in the north while pushing into our southern territories as well. My veteran infantry units have been wiped out by incendiary strikes, but we've set plenty of Americans on fire as well. I've also unlocked the big guns, finally. The Tiger rolls onto the battlefield, and everyone scatters. A few soldiers get some shots off, but the rockets hit the tank's side armor, and it shrugs it off. The enemy reinforcements dwindle, and a big group of them gets trapped between the Tiger and my ally. It's over, and I've erased the shame of my first battle.



THE INVINCIBLE

An intriguing mystery set on a strange and desolate alien world. The slick retro-futuristic art style is the immediate draw, but the weird, analog space equipment you'll be using to seek your missing crew also looks super satisfying to mess about with.

RELEASE 2022



SOMERVILLE

This rural, post-apocalyptic adventure comes from one of the original creators of the sublime *Limbo*, and its story of a lost family looks every bit as bleak and affecting as that modern classic. Absolutely sumptuous visuals are the icing on the cake.

RELEASE 2022



2022

PREVIEW



**THE ENEMY
OUTSMARTS US AND
MANAGES TO GET
BEHIND US IN THE
NORTH WHILE
PUSHING INTO OUR
SOUTHERN
TERRITORIES**

LITTLE DEVIL INSIDE

The rural English countryside—circa the Victorian era—plays host to all manner of strange, supernatural creatures in this action-RPG. Light survival elements make each expedition into the wilderness feel like its own perilous journey.

RELEASE 2022



MULTIVERSUS

Warner Bros heroes from Batman, to Jake the Dog, to Arya Stark battle in this *Smash Bros*-like. Supposedly inspired by the 'Ultra Instinct Shaggy' meme, it's certainly fully embraced it, with a superpowered take on the Scooby Doo character. Games are weird.

RELEASE 2022



2022 PREVIEW



RAINBOW SIX EXTRACTION

RELEASE Jan 2022 | DEV Ubisoft Montreal | PUB Ubisoft | LINK ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/rainbow-six/extraction



At last, opposing Rainbow Six factions have stopped trying to shoot one another in the face, and all it took was an alien invasion. *Extraction* is a strictly PvE experience—Operators have been lifted out of *Siege*, given a little tweak here and there, and dropped into this 1-3 player alien hunting simulator. By offering a mixture of offensive (such as Hibana and Sledge) and defensive (including Vigil and Pulse) characters, *Extraction* allows for a balanced team.

With 13 mission types and 12 'containment zones', there'll be plenty to do, and it'll rarely be as simple as spraying bullets all over the place. In fact, going loud will tend to bring a horde down on you, which will make objectives such as collecting samples much harder. Different enemy types have abilities such as invisibility, laying traps, and smashing through walls; there'll still be plenty of opportunities to put those guns (and gadgets, such as Smoke's gas grenades and Gridlock's TRAX stingers) to use.

DIFFERENT ENEMY TYPES HAVE ABILITIES SUCH AS INVISIBILITY, LAYING TRAPS, AND SMASHING THROUGH WALLS

LEGO STAR WARS: THE SKYWALKER SAGA

First announced in a time far, far away, you'll be able to complete the nine main series Star Wars movie adaptations included in any order you wish. Promises to include revamped combat with greater depth than past titles.

RELEASE Early 2022



STRANGER OF PARADISE: FINAL FANTASY ORIGIN

If you can get past the bizarre dialogue—most of which consists of protagonist Jack talking about wanting to kill Chaos—this more action-heavy spin-off of the long-running series looks like a wild, ridiculous ride.

RELEASE March 2022



BLOOD BOWL 3

Take an orc on the wild side, as Lou Reed didn't sing, in the next instalment of gaming's most violent sport. Somehow, everybody's still taking a god named Nuffle seriously, and so *Blood Bowl* continues. The latest turn-based, ultraviolent take on football will be soothingly familiar to fans—but with some new content thrown in.

A more fully featured solo campaign, greater customization, four new races, systems based on the latest version of the board game's rules, new skills, and a new competitive mode should make for a freshly gruesome experience.



RELEASE 2022 | DEV Cyanide Studio | PUB Nacon | LINK cyanide-studio.com/blood-bowl-3



SAINTS ROW

RELEASE August 2022 | DEV Volition | PUB Deep Silver | LINK saintsrow.com

An open-world title where you and your friends do crimes? You never know, maybe it'll catch on.

The last few *Saints Row* games, featuring aliens, virtual reality worlds,

super powers, and a musical adventure through literal Hell, weren't exactly grounded. This reboot will be reining things in (a bit) and rebooting the story, in the new fictional city of Santo Ileso. The biggest setting in the series so far,

you—as ever, playing a fully customizable character dubbed only 'the Boss'—will work with your crew of trendy hipster criminals, Neenah, Kevin, and Eli, to dominate it. But with three established gangs already in charge of the streets, this takeover will be easier said than done.

You'll get a wingsuit, allowing you to leap from the top of tall buildings without fear of a messy landing (hey, I said they were reining it in a bit). One way perhaps to transport yourself between the game's Criminal Ventures, wholesome businesses such as drug dealing and carjacking that can strengthen your gang.

Although the release date was knocked back six months, what's been shown so far is promising. Driving is always a big part of these types of games, and the new car combat could turn out to be a genius addition. Cops on your tail? Just hurl your car into them with the new sideswipe attack, or climb onto the roof for a better shot, until their cars are trashed. Peaceful getaways are for losers, right?

TINY TINA'S WONDERLANDS

Acronym fans will be looking forward to this PC TTRPG FPS based on DLC (it's a spin-off from one of *Borderlands 2*'s expansions, *Assault on Dragon Keep*). In a first for the series, you create your own character, picking from classes including the 'Stabbomancer'.

RELEASE March 2022



STEELRISING

Eighteenth century France. Louis XVI is ruthlessly crushing the revolution with his army of steampunk robots (may not be historically accurate). It's up to you to stop him, playing as an even more advanced automaton powered by the superior force of clockwork.

RELEASE June 2022

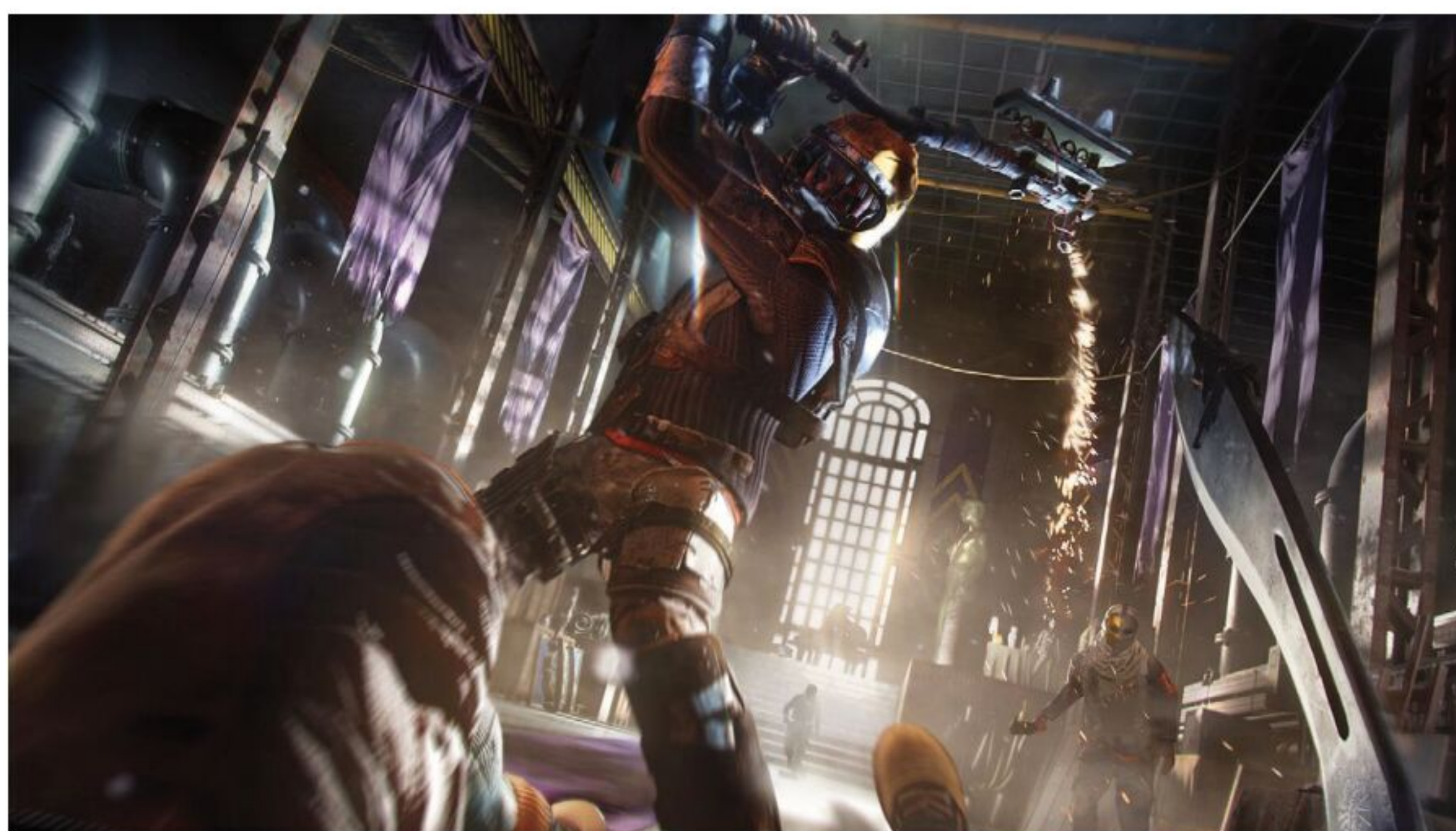


REDFALL

Arkane's next project has a deliciously inviting horror premise. Vampires created in a science experiment gone wrong have cut off the town of Redfall from the rest of civilization, and are feasting on its inhabitants. However, four survivors armed with high-tech vamp-busting tech, and some eyebrow-raising powers of their own—squad member Layla's telekinesis sure looks like a lot of fun—are ready to take on the town's pointy-toothed threat. The ability to play through this as a four-person co-op squad should add a new flavor to Arkane's distinctive immersive sim thrills.



RELEASE Summer 2022 | **DEV** Arkane | **PUB** Bethesda | **LINK** xbox.com/en-GB/games/redfall



DYING LIGHT 2

RELEASE February 4, 2022 | **DEV** Techland | **PUB** In-house | **LINK** dl2.dyinglightgame.com

Parkour zombie-bashing is finally back, as developer Techland looks ready to finally release its long-awaited sequel, which sees you plunked in the middle of the 'Modern Dark Ages' and shaping the fate of one

of humanity's last surviving settlements: The City.

Said city, which is split into seven districts, is just as key to this sequel as running away from flesh-eaters, and you'll be able to make choices that will

significantly affect the environment you play in. For instance, turning the water pumps on for one district means draining another, giving you a way to explore that new area... and meeting the zombies that have previously been dormant for years.

The city is also subject to an expansion of the first game's day/night cycle, where the most dangerous undead retreat to their nests during the day and spill forth into the world at night, raising the stakes for player character Aiden and the tension for us. We've already seen a gallery of mutated virals (the obligatory lore name for these zombies) that look terrifying, grotesque, and frankly not very friendly.

If you do venture out, then Aiden's acrobatic abilities should be able to help keep you alive. He's more agile than ever, wall-running, leaping across rooftops, and even using zombies to cushion his fall for daring landings. He's no slouch when it comes to handling a weapon either, still favoring melee combat, although you'll need to know when to fight and when to flee.

THE CALLISTO PROTOCOL

A sci-fi horror game from the director of the original *Dead Space*, set 300 years in the future of the *PUBG* universe. These mutated, tentacled monsters look equally as terrifying as hiding in a bathroom holding a frying pan, so it's all a natural fit when you think about it.

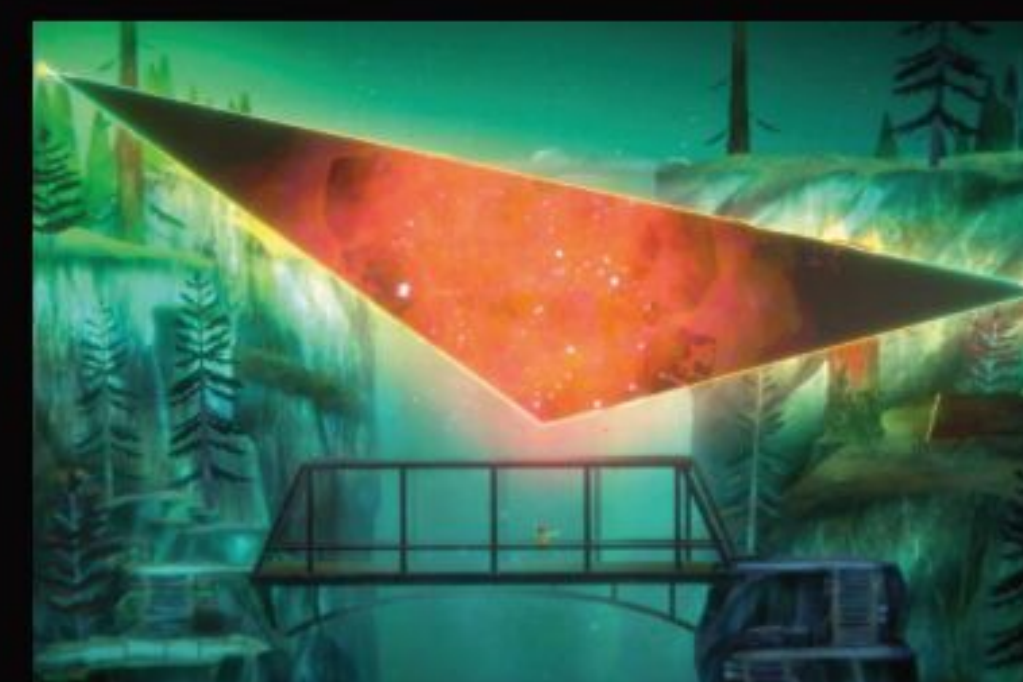
RELEASE 2022



OXENFREE II: LOST SIGNALS

After the strange events of the fantastic first game, new protagonist Riley is back in the town of Camena to investigate mysterious radio signals. Her walkie-talkie allows her to chat with all sorts who get on the frequencies, leading to plenty of spooky aural encounters.

RELEASE 2022





GHOSTWIRE TOKYO

RELEASE Spring 2022 | DEV Tango Gameworks | PUB Bethesda | LINK bethesda.net/en/game/ghostwire-tokyo

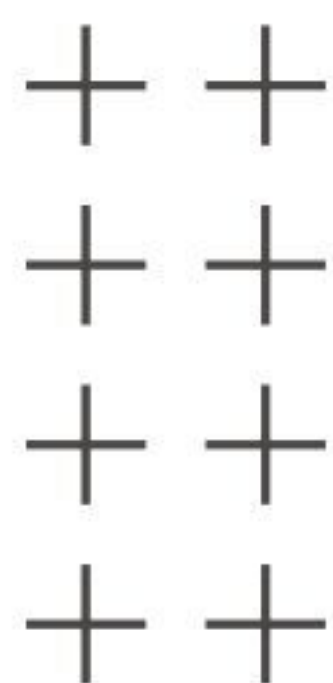
The latest horror game from original *Resident Evil* director Shinji Mikami's studio sees the Tokyo population vanish, replaced with haunting apparitions and a malevolent figure cackling away on the giant screens plastered around Shibuya Crossing.

Exploring the deserted city in first person, you'll learn to master magical elemental abilities to tackle this ghostly threat. As you do so, you'll learn more about the sudden disappearance, and

the mysterious and frightening 'Hannya' occultists who seem to be the culprits behind it.

As ever in a Tango Gameworks' jam, the real fun is admiring/hiding from the twisted creatures you come across, with trailers showing us spindly and faceless men in suits, a ghostly woman wielding a large pair of scissors, and headless school girls. They appear to be as haunting as *The Evil Within*'s best beasts, and coupled with the neon buzz of Tokyo, this looks to be one of next year's most atmospheric games.

TRAILERS SHOW US SPINDLY AND FACELESS MEN IN SUITS AND A GHOSTLY WOMAN WIELDING A LARGE PAIR OF SCISSORS



EVIL DEAD: THE GAME

This multiplayer shooter has shades of *Friday The 13th: The Game* about it, as one set of players fights deadites as recognisable characters from the series—including, of course, Ash—while another takes control of a 'Kandarian Demon' to hunt and torment them.

RELEASE February 2022



THE OUTLAST TRIALS

This spin-off of the grisly *Outlast* series of horror games does you the kindness of letting you play co-op with up to three friends by your side. A bit of moral support should do wonders for getting you through all those jumpscare and gruesome monster encounters.

RELEASE 2022



TOTAL WAR: WARHAMMER III

RELEASE February 17, 2022 | DEV Creative Assembly | PUB Sega | LINK totalwar.com

After two glorious *Total War: Warhammer* games and a cavalcade of DLC featuring most noteworthy factions from Games Workshop's universe, many of us were left asking what could possibly be next for the third and final game in the trilogy? Of course, there are many Warhammer factions whose units and lore aren't as well documented, as well as the semi-abstract realms of those colorful Chaos Gods, but would Creative Assembly really venture into this strange new territory?

Why but of course it would! And it's doing it with the exponentially growing confidence of a studio that's been intertwined with the world of Warhammer for a good seven years now. The new factions are a motley mix of the rough (Ogre Kingdoms), the regal (Kislev and Cathay), and the otherworldly, with the Daemons of Chaos divided into separate Nurgle, Tzeentch, Slaanesh, and Khorne armies.

That confidence has been palpable in all the *Total War: Warhammer III* battle footage we've seen throughout 2021. Cathay using dragons and hot air balloons to defend a great wall against the neon-firing hordes of the Lord of Change, the Ice Queen of the Slavic-inspired Kislev taking her winged lancers and War Bear Riders to the gates of hell against Khorne, and even an all-Chaos showdown in a realm of rot between the Plaguebearers of Nurgle and horny hedonists of Slaanesh.

It really is spectacular stuff—a firework ending to a trilogy that, by the end of the third game's DLC run, will have been in almost non-stop development for the best part of a decade. But beyond the bright lights and dazzle of the battlefield, it's

impressive to see how Creative Assembly is digging ever-deeper into making each faction's campaigns feel distinct. Where the first *Total War: Warhammer* played things relatively safe, the second really mixed things up, and the success of that experiment has propelled Creative Assembly to go all out in weird and wonderful campaign mechanics for the third game.

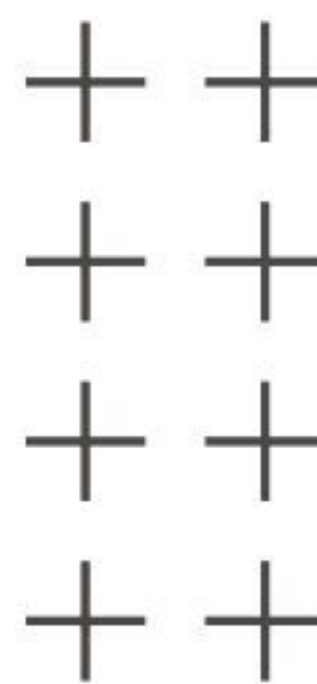
As you might imagine, Chaos factions aren't too keen on cramming themselves into human settlements, so their focus is very much on spreading their respective god's kinks throughout the mortal realms. Nurgle turns human settlements into foetid fields, while Tzeentch, God of Change, can mess with the campaign map like a cheating child with a board game—tracking armies, messing with enemy turns, and even transferring control of settlement between different factions.

GODS DAMN IT

The campaign map looks set to be more alive than ever, constantly changing to reflect the advances and schemings of the Chaos Gods, while Cathay and Kislev attempt to keep them at bay.

Then there are the little things, like tiered cities and the ability to build barricades in them, giving depth to the urban combat that's been oddly lacking throughout the 20-plus year history of the *Total War* series.

Nurgle only knows how this most out-there of entries in an already out-there series will merge into the Mortal Empires campaign, which will eventually contain the maps and factions from all three games in the series. However it ends up looking, in a series that has so far answered all questions with the force of a Mournfang Cavalry charge, we have no reason to doubt they'll do it right.



BEACON PINES

Adorable artwork disguises a surprisingly creepy atmosphere in this adventure game through a magical storybook. By changing words in the text, you can alter the direction of the tale—and change the fates of the various characters within it, for better or worse.

RELEASE 2022



A PLAGUE TALE: REQUIEM

The first game left a lot on the table by the end—both in terms of dangling story threads and untapped potential in its rat-based puzzles. We're hoping this swarming sequel will round out the concept more fully as it takes us to new regions of its alt-history world.

RELEASE 2022



2022 PREVIEW



AS YOU MIGHT
IMAGINE, CHAOS
FACTIONS
AREN'T TOO KEEN
ON CRAMMING
THEMSELVES INTO
HUMAN
SETTLEMENTS

CONVERGENCE: A LEAGUE OF LEGENDS STORY

Another 'Riot Forge' release—set in the *League of Legends* universe, but from a different dev—this action-platformer lets champion Ekko take the spotlight. His time-travel powers offer loads of potential for rapid-fire fun, and the art style is a joy.

RELEASE 2022



SONG OF NUNU: A LEAGUE OF LEGENDS STORY

This one's a Riot Forge game too, a third-person adventure from the creators of indie darling *RIME* that focuses on the friendship between fun-loving child Nunu and his best friend Willump, who happens to be an enormous yeti.

RELEASE 2022



2022 PREVIEW



TWO POINT CAMPUS

RELEASE 2022 | DEV Two Point Studios | PUB Sega | LINK twopointcampus.com

Two Point Studios' previous release, a slapstick hospital management sim, was a surprise hit whose anarchic sense of humor belied a complex and demanding little game. Two Point is now looking to bring the same sort of experience to the halls of higher learning. *Campus* promises a great deal of freedom with how you can lay out your school, and the developer has stated that it wants to encourage player creativity.

Pre-release content indicates Two Point's sense of humor is as present as before. For example: You can send your students to 'knight school' where they learn the ways of chivalry as opposed to business management. Other oddballs you can make out from Two Point's trailers include wizards, clowns, robots, and chefs, all life paths I wish my own college had offered me. It'll be up to you whether you wind up with an Oxford University or an Honest Joe's Discount Academy when *Two Point Campus* releases later this year.

**CAMPUS PROMISES
A GREAT DEAL OF
FREEDOM WITH
HOW YOU CAN
LAY OUT YOUR
SCHOOL**

SEA OF STARS

A top-down, turn-based RPG highly reminiscent of SNES classics like *Chrono Trigger* and *Secret of Mana*, *Sea of Stars* boasts a unique setting, striking art style, and a character-driven story centered on a six-person adventuring party who wield 'Eclipse Magic' against 'the Fleshmancer'.

RELEASE 2022



THE LORD OF THE RINGS: GOLLUM

This prequel adventure lets you step into the shoes of everyone's favorite shriveled little ghoul. Or, er, it would if he ever wore shoes. You'll need to sneak your way around Mordor in a story set before the events of LOTR and The Hobbit.

RELEASE Autumn 2022



DESTINY 2: THE WITCH QUEEN

If there's one thing *Destiny* players love more than the game itself, it's complaining about *Destiny*. Sometimes it's just gamer bluster, but often it's a perfectly understandable response to how close Bungie can get to looter shooter perfection and just miss the mark. *The Witch Queen* promises a new zone, the introduction of weapon crafting, and a new glaive weapon type. Hopefully I and the other baying wolves of the *Destiny* community will find what we're looking for in *Destiny 2*'s fourth expansion.



RELEASE February 22, 2022 | DEV Bungie | PUB In-house | LINK bungie.net



GUILD WARS 2: END OF DRAGONS

RELEASE February 2022 | DEV ArenaNet | PUB NCSoft | LINK bit.ly/3GhmdC5

The venerable MMO *Guild Wars 2* is about to receive its third expansion pack as it enters its tenth year of life. *End of Dragons* will see players return to the land of Cantha, a vibrant fantasy counterpart to China, for

the first time since the *Factions* expansion to the first *Guild Wars* released in 2006. The plot will center on the lore of this isolated land, formerly isolated from the rest of the world for one hundred years, and prominently

features a great sea frozen into solid jade by some mysterious magical force.

In addition to the new zone and story content, *End of Dragons* is adding further level 80 specialization options to each of its base professions. The one that particularly caught my eye is the samurai-like 'Bladesworn' specialization for Warriors, as it grants access to that most essential of videogame weapons: The gunsword. Melee in ranged in one—nothing beats that.

We at PC Gamer are also very excited for the new rocket-propelled Siege Turtle mounts, truly wise and fearsome companions for this upcoming adventure. While *Guild Wars 2* lacks the high profile of other MMOs like *Final Fantasy XIV* or *The Elder Scrolls Online*, it has maintained a consistent and passionate player-base, bolstered by regular updates between its more infrequent expansion releases. The launch of *End of Dragons* might be the perfect time to jump back into the world of *Guild Wars 2* after a hiatus, or even to jump in and give it a try for the first time.

PRINCE OF PERSIA: SANDS OF TIME REMAKE

Sands of Time is a platforming classic, melding parkour-based movement with a swashbuckling story. Ubisoft's upcoming remake offers an interpretation of that game's gameplay with shiny modern rendering tech.

RELEASE 2022



DRAGON BALL: THE BREAKERS

This bizarre asymmetric multiplayer game takes cues from *Dead By Daylight*, having one player adopt the role of a classic Dragon Ball Z villain like Cell, who evolves and grows in power while seven others play as regular humans trying to hold out till Goku arrives to save them.

RELEASE 2022



HOMEWORLD 3

Producing a sequel to a game almost two decades old isn't that strange nowadays. Nor is such a game happening thanks to crowdfunding. The level to which the developer of this space RTS seem to be allowing backers to steer development, however, is intriguing.

Backer survey responses have shaped both writing and gameplay design, with Blackbird listening carefully to what they've been told are the most important parts of *Homeworld* to its fans. Will all that community input result in a better game, or is it a case of too many cooks? We'll find out later this year.



RELEASE Q4 2022 | DEV Blackbird Interactive | PUB Gearbox | LINK gearboxpublishing.com/game/homeworld-3



STARFIELD

RELEASE November 2022 | DEV Bethesda | PUB Bethesda | LINK bethesda.net/en/game/starfield

Back in 2018, Bethesda announced that it was planning to release a game that wasn't *Skyrim*. A brand new IP, in fact; still a *Fallout*/*Elder Scrolls* style RPG, but this time, *in space*. It's a typically ambitious

project for the studio, so much so that it's only had time to re-release *Skyrim* once since *Starfield* was announced.

In the 24th century, a big ol' space kerfuffle known as the Colony War takes place. The game begins two decades

after things have settled down, as your typically customizable character embarks upon "an epic journey to answer humanity's greatest mystery". It looks set to be one heck of a huge game, with plenty of choices. "It's all the paths you *didn't* take that make it special for you," is the pretty neat way Todd Howard puts it.

Bethesda RPGs have a moment when the scale of the open world is truly revealed to you (like the end of the prison escape in *Oblivion*). Bethesda calls these 'step-out moments' and, interestingly, it's saying *Starfield* actually has two. Could the second be the introduction of planet-hopping space travel?

The potential seems enormous—*Skyrim* but on a galactic scale is a hell of a pitch. The question is, will such enormous scale lead to even more of the developer's trademark open world jank and bugs?

Based on past form, it'll still be a must-play even if so. And perhaps with a new series to focus on, Bethesda might finally stop re-releasing *Skyrim*.

SLIME RANCHER 2

The first game was a brilliantly charming twist on a farming sim, and the sequel looks equally adorable. It sees heroine Beatrix LeBeau sailing her way across the Slime Sea to Rainbow Island, to Hoover up even more lovely little slimes—including a bunch of new ones.

RELEASE 2022



SHADOW WARRIOR 3

Thought the third game would tone it down? Think again. If anything, the newest entry promises an even more outrageous, silly, frenetic, and gory first-person quipfest than the first two, and that's saying something. Expect slick action and questionable gags.

RELEASE 2022





KERBAL SPACE PROGRAM 2

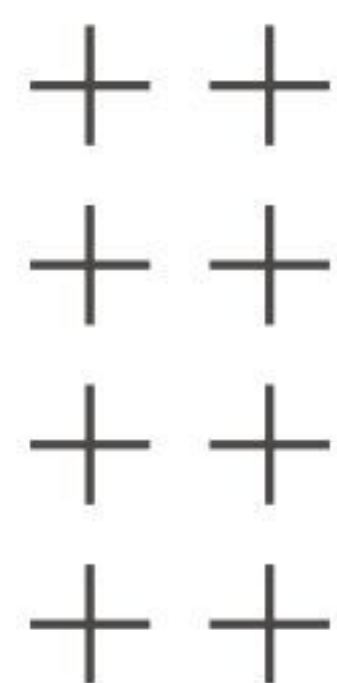
RELEASE 2022 | DEV Intercept Games | PUB In-house | LINK bit.ly/3GmV019

The last few years have led many of us to fantasize about quitting this planet altogether and shooting ourselves into space. So, what better game to look forward to than one which demands significant attention to detail in order to distract you from daily life, *and* allows you to live out the fantasy of space travel?

You're once again tasked with overseeing a whole space program (clue's in the name), the little green

Kerbals wisely or otherwise trusting you with their lives. Following feedback from the first game, new tutorials and improved UI will (hopefully) better help players understand what they're supposed to do and how the heck they're supposed to do it. Those already comfortable with the systems will be pleased to hear that the addition of colonies brings with it resource gathering and new building opportunities. Also: There's multiplayer! How exactly that'll work hasn't yet been revealed, but the idea is intriguing.

**NEW TUTORIALS
AND IMPROVED UI
WILL (HOPEFULLY)
BETTER HELP
PLAYERS
UNDERSTAND WHAT
THEY'RE SUPPOSED
TO DO**



THE KING OF FIGHTERS XV

The latest version of SNK's long-running fighting game series is now finally almost upon us. It throws two new characters and new systems, including 'shatter strikes', into the mix, as well as promising an "explosive climax" for the ongoing storyline and better-than-ever netcode.

RELEASE February 2022



DRAGON QUEST X OFFLINE

The original Dragon Quest X was an MMO spin-off of the beloved JRPG series, released only in Japan. Now it's getting an 'offline' re-release, allowing players to take on its content solo at their own pace. This version's not confirmed for English release yet either, but we're hopeful.

RELEASE TBC



MARVEL'S MIDNIGHT SUNS

RELEASE Late 2022 | DEV Firaxis Games | PUB 2K Games | LINK midnightsuns.2k.com

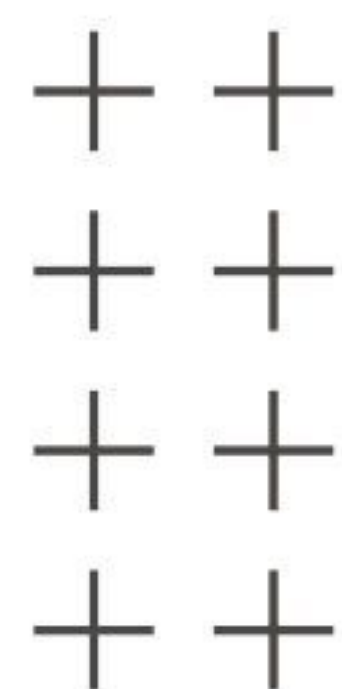
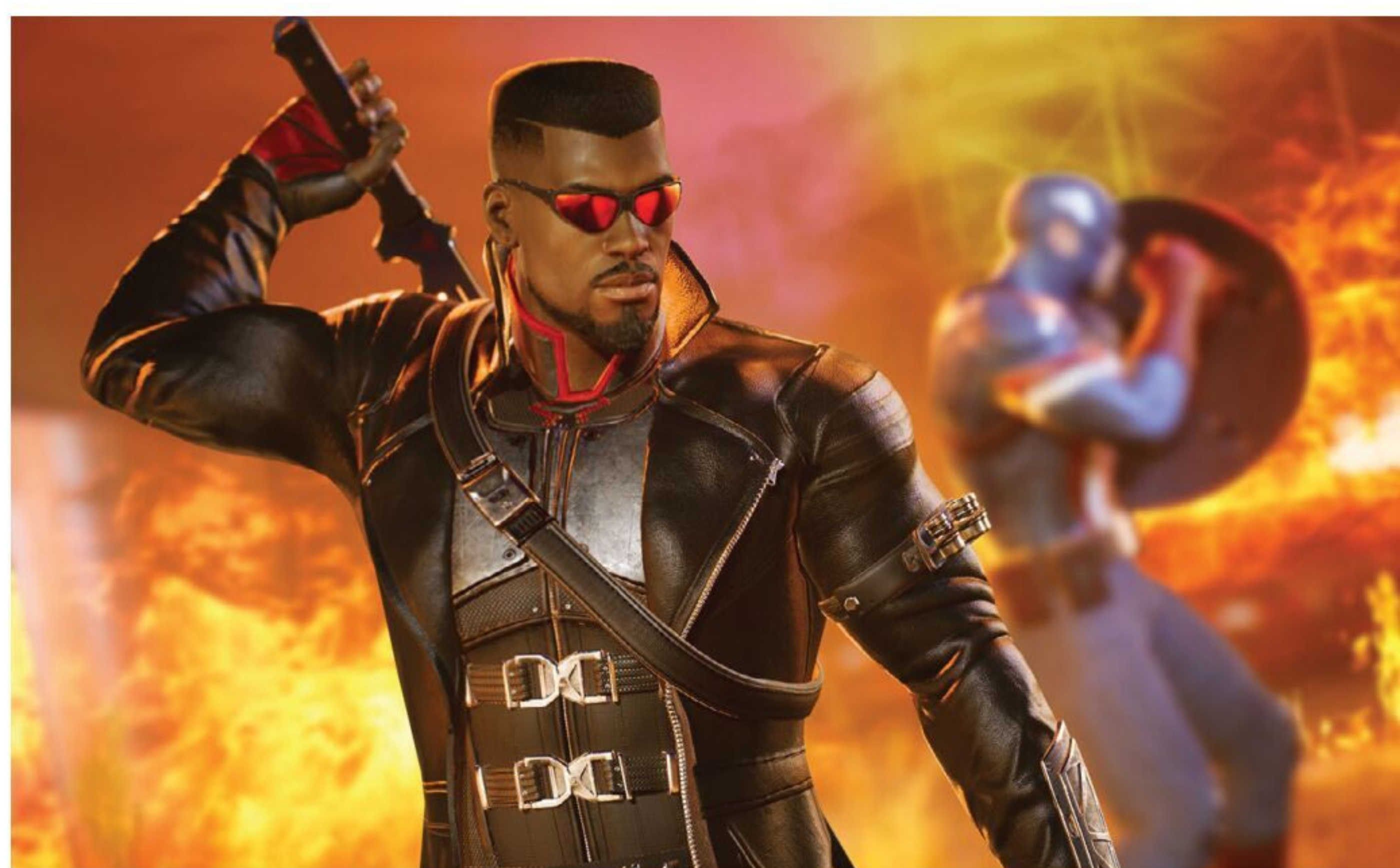
There's going to be a whole bunch of spandex-clad Marvel characters to command here and, as it's a combat-focussed title being developed by Firaxis, it's going to bear some resemblance to the game the studio is best known for; *Sid Meier's SimGolf*. No, wait—I meant to say *XCOM*. Loosely based on the comic series *Rise of the Midnight Sons*, a whole bunch of heroes have come together to defeat Hydra and the demon Lilith.

That team includes enough variety to please everyone, from cinematic successes including Captain America, Iron Man, and Wolverine, to comic fan favorites like Blade and Ghost Rider, to more obscure picks such as masters of the arcane Magik and Nico Minoru, and more. You'll pick your squad of two from this hefty roster, and lead them into battle as player character 'the Hunter', a fully customizable superhero created specifically for this game.

Combat is turn-based, but it's not quite what you might expect. Attacks and abilities are literally dealt out via a card system. Cards come in three flavors; Attack, Skill, and Heroic. A character's Heroic is their most powerful attack, and requires sufficient Heroism—built up during play—in order to activate. Firaxis promises that the different heroes will all feel very different to play, and on top of those signature abilities everybody will be able to make use of the environment for attack and defence. You can move around the combat area until you use an ability, picking the best position to use your next card from. In the Sabretooth fight streamed by the developer, for example, Wolverine knocks out four enemies at once by kicking a big bin at them. Why wasn't that in any of the movies?

It's a more different approach from *XCOM* than you might expect, though given the significant change in subject matter it makes sense that Firaxis isn't resting on its laurels. Combat looks streamlined and rather less deadly, but no less tactically interesting, with all the new systems introducing their own wrinkles and opportunities.

It's not all wandering around looking for people to heroically kick the living crap out of, mind you. Between missions you, as the Hunter, will be able to explore the Abbey. This is your base of operations, where RPG elements will come to the fore. You have a pet Hellhound called Charlie (yes, you can pet the dog in *Midnight Suns*), a whole building (and outer grounds) to explore, and a selection of Marvel heroes to hang out with. Chatting to your super-pals will increase your relationship over time, allowing you to live out your fantasy of being best friends with Dr Strange. No, you can't kiss him.



ARK 2

A multiplayer survival game with dinosaurs that you can ride? And also Vin Diesel for some reason (he's not yet confirmed rideable)? Sure, why not, sign us up. But we're certainly hoping it'll be more accessible—and less rough around the edges—than the first game.

RELEASE 2022



AVATAR: FRONTIERS OF PANDORA

Set in the world of the movie that's apparently still getting a sequel one day, Massive Entertainment's first-person adventure casts you as one of the Na'vi protecting their home planet from the RDA invasion.

RELEASE 2022



2022 PREVIEW



THE PLAYER CHARACTER IS 'THE HUNTER', A CUSTOMIZABLE SUPERHERO CREATED SPECIFICALLY FOR THIS GAME

DEAD SPACE REMAKE

Appropriately enough, the sci-fi horror classic is being rebuilt piece by piece, with new assets. It'll still be the same game—well, mostly (a few changes will be made to systems and story)—only even more shiny and disgusting-looking. More nightmare fuel for everybody!

RELEASE 2022



FREEDOM PLANET 2

This sequel looks just as cute as the original, and still offers a fresh indie take on retro *Sonic the Hedgehog*-style platforming. Changes and additions include a new item system, and a guard button for blocking enemy attacks, adding a new dimension to fights.

RELEASE Spring 2022



2022 PREVIEW



WARHAMMER 40K DARKTIDE

RELEASE Spring 2022 | DEV Fatshark | PUB In-house | LINK playdarktide.com

It feels like just yesterday we were talking about *Darktide* in our 2021 preview, but Fatshark's 40k-based successor to the *Warhammer: Vermintide* games was delayed out of last year and into this one. Hopefully the extra time has given Fatshark room to dial in its improvements to that chaotic combat we've come to love.

The fresh look and new weapon balance inherent to the shift in setting should be an interesting change from



Vermintide. 40k's megadark, heavy metal album art aesthetic is perhaps even more suited than regular Warhammer to just turning off those fiddly high-functioning parts of your brain and mowing down some gribbly monsters with your friends. The premise cues that up perfectly, casting you as Inquisitorial agents exploring a mega-city infested with cultists, mutants, and daemons of the diseased god Nurgle. With a chainsword in one hand and a gun shaped like a box in the other, it's up to you to clean house.

THE FRESH LOOK AND NEW WEAPON BALANCE INHERENT TO THE SHIFT IN SETTING ARE GOING TO BE A REFRESHING CHANGE FROM VERMINTIDE

MONSTER HUNTER RISE

This former Switch exclusive is finally coming to PC alongside a massive bump to frame rate and resolution. Understandably for a game originating on handheld, it's not as grand in scope as *World*—but clever additions make combat more acrobatic and thrilling.

RELEASE January 12, 2022



UNCHARTED: LEGACY OF THIEVES COLLECTION

No 1440p 120fps *Bloodborne* for us, but Sony is at least sharing some of its toys this year. *Legacy of Thieves* includes Drake's final adventure, *Uncharted 4*, as well as the excellent spin-off, *Lost Legacy* starring Chloe Frazer.

RELEASE 2022

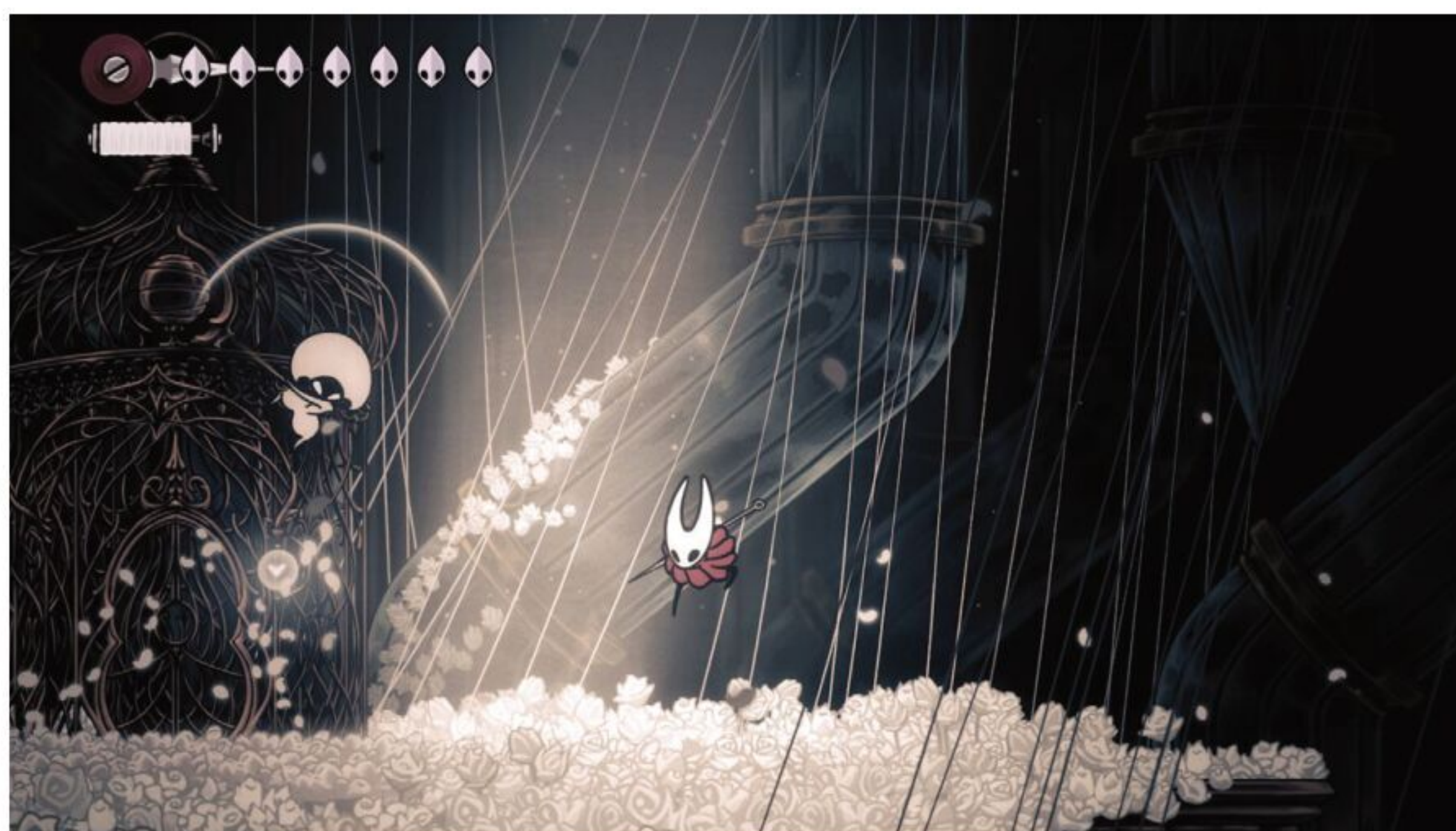


BALDUR'S GATE III

We can certainly hope that Larian's early access RPG will see its 1.0 release this year. This continuation of Bioware's legendary series has had its first act available to the public since October 2020, and the preview has been impressive. Larian has taken the improvisational, tabletop-inspired combat of their *Divinity* series, and transposed it perfectly into the D&D 5th edition rules set, with various updates across 2020 and 2021 already expanding the content available and tightening up all the dice-rolling action. If it can stick the landing, this is on track to be a modern classic of the genre.



RELEASE TBC | DEV Larian | PUB In-house | LINK baldursgate3.game



HOLLOW KNIGHT: SILKSONG

RELEASE TBC | DEV Team Cherry | PUB In-house | LINK hollowknightsilksong.com

The first *Hollow Knight* was one of those precious indie miracles. A three-person team was able to craft a Metroidvania that stands shoulder-to-shoulder with classics of the genre like *Super Metroid*

and *Symphony of the Night*. Not only that, but *Hollow Knight* had an incredible heart as well, telling a hauntingly beautiful story with a charismatic cast of little bug friends, all backed up by a stellar soundtrack.

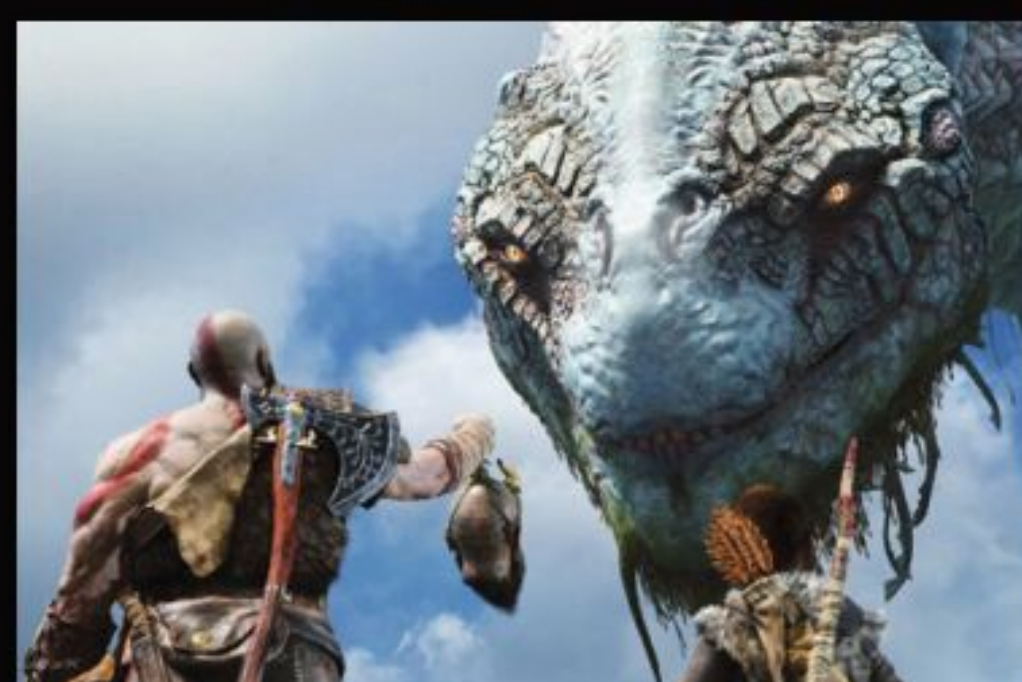
Team Cherry has had a tall order trying to follow that up, which perhaps explains the long wait for this sequel. What started as an expansion pack to *Hollow Knight* ballooned into a full standalone game starring the original's frenemy, rival, and occasional boss enemy Hornet. Following the events of the original *Hollow Knight*, she finds herself traveling across a new kingdom, far away from her home of Hallownest, and must ascend to its highest peak to uncover its mysteries.

Three years ago we were shown a two-minute trailer and twenty-minute gameplay preview, and we've had precious little to sustain ourselves ever since. What we saw showed *Hollow Knight*'s sense of mystery and exploration alive and well, alongside new and exciting mobility options in combat and platforming. Indeed, the polished state of that preview build may have gotten our hopes up over how close the game was to completion. Hope springs eternal though, and we suspect 2022 will be the year we can finally return to that enchanted, spooky world.

GOD OF WAR

Boy, stop messing around with that glorified jester, Nathan Drake. *Uncharted* isn't the only PlayStation exclusive making the crossing. Hoist your axe and treat yourself to *Grumpy Dad Norse Road Trip Simulator 2018*. It's a brilliantly cinematic, story-driven adventure.

RELEASE January 14, 2022



GOODBYE VOLCANO HIGH

An emotional, coming-of-age adventure about identity, romance, and life's transitions. But also humanoid dinosaurs and the end of the world. Another delayed 2021 release, but we can finally look forward to getting our heartstrings plucked later this year.

RELEASE 2022



STRAY

Putting you in the paws of a cat in a neon-drenched city devoid of humanity, but filled with androids who appear to have TVs for faces, *Stray* is anything but formulaic.

This open world adventure tasks you with making your way across the grimy metropolis in order to reunite with your lost family. Accompanying you is B12, a helpful robot who can translate the language of his fellow machines for you.

The furry main character was heavily inspired by the studio founder's own cats, Murtaugh and Riggs. All together now: awwwwwwwwwwww!



RELEASE 2022 | DEV BlueTwelve Studio | PUB Annapurna Interactive | LINK stray.game



SIFU

RELEASE February 8, 2022 | DEV Slocap | PUB In-house | LINK sifugame.com

A revenge tale that sees a kung fu student hunt down the people who killed their father, this brawler seeks to recreate the action of classic martial arts cinema in videogame form. There's more than a

little Jackie Chan and Bruce Lee in its DNA, though the influence of recent hits such as *The Raid* and *Old Boy* is also evident in some of its slick setpieces.

Slocap's combat is based on the Pak Mei style of kung fu, and the

footage we've seen places an emphasis on controlling space, dodging and parrying blows, and using the environment to your advantage. Bottles, mops, and baseball bats can all be utilized to gain an advantage in battering whatever thugs are between you and your goals.

Slocap's previous game, *Absolver*, already proved their chops when it comes to creating deep and satisfying fighting systems—and *Sifu* only looks more intricate and authentic than even that impressive debut. Though don't expect that game's PvP battles—this looks to be solo only.

One of *Sifu*'s most intriguing systems is that every 'death' will age our vengeful protagonist. Age isn't just a number, either. As the character gets older, their appearance will visibly change to show the ravages of time, and they're able to do more damage with their attacks. However, their increasing frailty also means they take more damage. Should you die once too often and run out of years, then your journey will reach a premature end.

GOTHAM KNIGHTS

This Bat Gang adventure might not technically be set in the *Arkham*-verse, but it sure has the same look and feel. The sinister Court of Owls are in town, and without Batman, it'll be up to Nightwing, Robin, Red Hood, and Batgirl to tackle this new (but very old) threat.

RELEASE 2022



RIVER CITY GIRLS 2

The charming retro brawler is back for another scrap, with developer WayForward adding online co-op this time so you can batter goons as Kyoko and Misako without sharing a coach with a mate. The lowlife of River City should be very scared indeed.

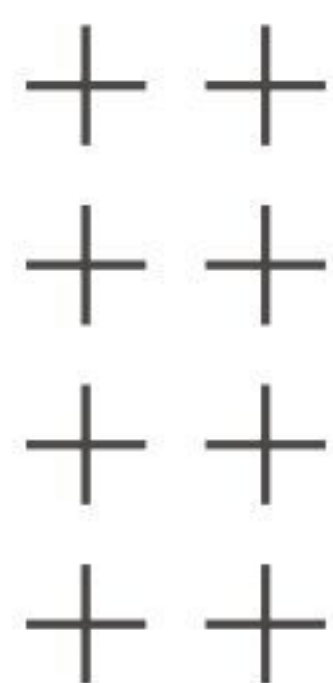
RELEASE 2022





SUICIDE SQUAD: KILL THE JUSTICE LEAGUE

RELEASE 2022 | DEV Rocksteady | PUB Warner Bros | LINK suicidesquadgame.com/en-gb



Capturing the gleefully violent and irreverent tone of the comics, this videogame debut for DC's anti-villain team sees them being sent on a mission into Metropolis to neutralize some pretty heavy threats. While the squad might not know what they're up against to begin with, the title gives us a pretty big clue at who is in their crosshairs.

There's plenty to be excited about with this one. For starters, it marks a return to the *Arkham*-verse which developer Rocksteady created, and the thought of them getting their hands on the wider cast of DC characters should have any fan delighted, considering the stellar job they did with *Batman*. It also boasts four-player co-op, allowing you to take on Superman et al with your friends at your side.

FOR STARTERS, IT MARKS A RETURN TO THE ARKHAM VERSE WHICH DEVELOPER ROCKSTEADY CREATED

AZTECH: FORGOTTEN GODS

The secrets of a sci-fi mesopotamian city are the heart of this action-adventure, which intriguingly claims its genre to be 'cyber-stone'. Main character Achtli must use the power of the forgotten gods against them in her quest to discover the truth of this unusual setting.

RELEASE Q1 2022



BOMB RUSH CYBERFUNK

If you've been craving a *Jet Set Radio*-inspired open world soundtrack by that classic's composer Hideki Naganuma, then this vibey open world from the creators of *Lethal League* has all the retro flavoring and skating action that you could possibly hope for.

RELEASE 2022





CLASH: ARTIFACTS OF CHAOS

RELEASE June 2022 | DEV ACE Team | PUB Nacon | LINK bit.ly/3DsQuMK

The next delightfully odd title from ACE Team, creators of this year's *The Eternal Cylinder* but also known for the *Zeno Clash* games, which this title shares a world with. As in *Zeno Clash*, this is a brawler, but there's now the option for third-person as well as first-person punching. Fights are also now heavily affected by a preceding dice game, which can change the rules and add significant and strange new modifiers to the brawl.



You're taking control of a lad named Psuedo, a gross but charming looking dude who's no less a misfit than the other strange denizens. If you're going to be punching them in the face, they may as well have interesting faces, right? There's also multiplayer modes, co-op and competitive, which take place in Psuedo's vivid dreams. As always, ACE Team does weird like nobody else. Like their previous games, *Clash: Artifacts of Chaos* feels destined to be a cult classic, and fans should be excited to return to a truly unique setting.

**THERE'S ALSO
MULTIPLAYER
MODES, CO-OP AND
COMPETITIVE,
WHICH TAKE PLACE
IN PSUEDO'S VIVID
DREAMS**

CULTIC

Another 1990s throwback first-person shooter with retro graphics and an arsenal of meaty weaponry. You've got to fight your way through a mysterious cult, one bullet at a time—as you might have guessed from the name. Expect massive amounts of chunky pixel gore.

RELEASE Q1 2022



FORSPOKEN

When protagonist Frey is transported from New York City in our world to the fantasy setting of Athia, she's understandably confused. But in no time she's wielding powerful elemental magic to explosively batter monsters and traverse the land.

RELEASE 2022



SALT AND SACRIFICE

This sequel to 2016's *Salt and Sanctuary* continues its quest to capture as much of *Dark Souls*' essence as possible in a sidescrolling format. As a Marked Inquisitor, you're charged with roaming the land slaying malevolent magic users and using their meat and bones to craft new weapons and armor. Delightful.

There's no end of *Souls* imitators these days, but the first game really stood out from the crowd for its world design and attention to detail. Here's hoping this follow-up is an even more impressive effort.



RELEASE Q1 2022 | DEV Ska Studios | PUB In-house | LINK ska-studios.com



STALKER 2: HEART OF CHERNOBYL

RELEASE April 28, 2022 | DEV GSC Game World | PUB In-house | LINK stalker2.com

Few series have as devoted a following as cult classic *STALKER* and its three titles *Shadow of Chernobyl*, *Clear Sky*, and *Call of Prip'yat*. Naturally, that makes expectations high for this sequel—

especially coming 13 long years later after much behind-the-scenes drama.

For our recent cover feature, the developer introduced us to a changed Zone—affected by that span of time in ways that make it all the stranger, more

beautiful, and more desolate than we've ever seen it before. New factions and creatures roam the radioactive wastes, and it's a true open world this time, too, not divided into discrete sections as in the original games.

It'll play host, we're promised, to a sprawling non-linear story in which your choices, including which factions you side with, will have a huge impact, making it "impossible" to see everything in a single playthrough. That's on top of the hunt for the powerful and dangerous artifacts that make the Zone so wonderfully weird—claiming those treasures will take preparation, smarts, and perhaps some luck as you navigate the supernatural effects they generate around them.

All that, and you'll have to make sure you keep on top of your character's basic needs. Run out of food and your aim will suffer; stay awake too long and your vision will blur and you may even start to hallucinate. You can't exactly stop in at a B&B in the zone, so keeping yourself healthy (and radiation free) will be a constant challenge.

VOIDTRAIN

A strange and exciting co-op survival game about maintaining and upgrading a dimension hopping train, where you'll have to grapple hook your way around floating worlds and avoid the attentions of huge, flying beasts. Already available in Early Access form on the Epic store.

RELEASE 2022



EARTHLOCK 2

This sequel switches things up from the old school JRPG style of the first to an open world action-RPG approach. Like the original, it stars a cast of adorable characters—including this lovely furry pig boy—this time on a quest to rescue their missing loved ones.

RELEASE 2022



Elden Ring

CIRCL I

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AGONS

FromSoftware's **ELDEN RING** is a fraught and fascinating balance between expansiveness and intrigue.

By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell



One mark of a great videogame is how clearly you remember it. A decade on from *Dark Souls*, there are still parts of its flame-cursed world I can readily map out on paper—their layouts, threats, and variables hammered into me by a combination of fabulous aesthetics, surgical perspectives, and brutal trial and error.

I already have a similarly crisp memory of parts of *Elden Ring*; FromSoftware's blend of *Souls* dungeons and combat with an open

world and day/night cycle reminiscent of *Breath of the Wild*. One of the first areas you'll reach in the early Limgrave region is a crumbling encampment backed by candle-strewn hearses. Guards in red peer into campfires. Others roam the paths, accompanied by wolves. It's a tidy little murder-maze with some familiar AI behaviors—as in *Souls*, the canines are fond of circling you before they pounce. Playing as an Enchanted Knight equipped with spear and staff, I do a bit of circling myself—creeping through bushes to different entrance points and felling sentries with Glintstone spells.

STAB LIBBING

One enemy makes it into melee range unscathed—a caped elite with midboss pretensions. It's a straightforward duel to begin with: Wait out his combos and don't overextend my own, dividing my stamina carefully between attack and retreat. I experiment with *Elden Ring*'s fancy dedicated jump button, a

ABOVE: Magic is flashier and more immediately powerful than in *Dark Souls*.

small but decisive departure from *Souls*, which lets you quickly stagger many shielded adversaries using plunging blows. I also make effective use of the new guard counter, which grants bonus damage when you launch a heavy attack after blocking a hit. But when I get the elite below 50% health, they raise the stakes, switching to a two-handed stance with more florid combos. I'm nearly killed by one riposte, but yank victory from the jaws of defeat through sheer Determination—that being a *Dark Souls 3*-style weapon skill that supercharges your next blow.

A lot of *Elden Ring* stands out this sharply in the memory, demanding meticulous attention to every inch of ground. But then you summon your valiant steed Torrent, a souped-up mountain goat with a double-jump, and the edges start to blur. The first of six open world regions, Limgrave is as glorious and torrid a backdrop as any *Souls* environment before: Mountainous trees of frozen starlight, temples that curve into the earth,

WHEN I GET THE ELITE BELOW 50% HEALTH, THEY RAISE THE STAKES

hinting at bottomless chambers beneath; winding, island-haunted shores that conjure up the *Shadow of the Colossus*. But there are some disappointments that illustrate what a challenge From has set for itself, in starting up a conversation between *Souls* and the open world.

The new emphasis on 360 degree wandering requires a degree of simplification and standardization, which seems totally opposed to the intricacies of *Souls* level design. There's a touch of *Far Cry* to certain enemy gatherings—take out the horn-blowers first, or they'll summon reinforcements!—and the freedom to tackle them in any order makes them feel all the more interchangeable. Sites of Grace—where you can level up and fast travel—are found moments away from each other, rather than being precious discoveries. For all the surface spectacle, Limgrave doesn't seem to have much of an underbelly: Many optional dungeons are just stairways to boss chambers. Horseback combat often turns skilled opponents into angry traffic cones, to be ridden around and hacked apart without much regard for their movesets.

many types of consumable with *Souls*, from flammable resins to foods that accelerate stamina recovery, but you can now craft your own on the hoof using berries, bones, and bits of gold-studded excrement. This is helpful, but it alters the ambience. In *Souls*, the real value of treasure is that it makes the geography intriguing. You'll see a glowing trinket dangling from a gibbet and suck in your breath. Can you reach that item on this path, or must you circle back later? Assess your blindspots: Where will the inevitable ambush come from if you dare to collect it? It feels like you're playing poker with the designer, except that rather than a trump card the designer has a firebomb cocked to throw.

Elden Ring's grander dungeons can be similarly mischievous. Below the seaward wall of Stormveil Castle, there's a sparsely wooded cliffside with dropped valuables unobtrusively defended by softly swooping eagles. At the other end of Limgrave, in the Murkwater Catacombs, goblins pose

SWORDS AND ENDS

Our favorite weapons in *Elden Ring* so far



ORDOVIS' GREATSWORD

This family-sized cleaver has an eye-watering AoE weapon skill... and an extremely long wind-up. Time its usage carefully.



REDUVIA

This heavy metal album cover of a dagger has a typically short reach, but you can use Blood Blade to perforate foes with streams of gore.



CARIAN GLINTSTONE SHIELD

A starting item for Enchanted Knights, this shield's Sorcerer Hunter skill absorbs spellfire and spits Glintstone bolts.

HORSING ABOUT

Above all, there's the bombardment of raw materials. *Elden Ring* shares

Elden Ring

as statues near a sarcophagus, catching tomb raiders with their trousers down. But there's much less artfulness to the crafting resources that litter the surface world. These are just respawning collectables to be hoovered up automatically, as much to be rid of the HUD prompt as anything else.

Elden Ring is fascinating, then, not just because it's a new FromSoftware game, but because it's two types of game struggling to co-exist. To couch it in *Souls* vernacular, it's a pair of inherently mismatched bosses trying to be Ornstein and Smough. In Stormveil Castle, layers of rickety staircases and overgrown gaps flash you back to *Demon's Souls*' Gates of Boletaria. Exit the castle and all of a sudden you're playing *Zelda* again, except that there's no free-climbing (not even a ledge mantle) and no whimsical object physics to entertain you on the road. At least you can sprint without draining your stamina.

Far from being put off, I'm eager to see how this difficult balancing act

will evolve in the course of a plot that asks you to choose between seeking 'power' and 'understanding'—a choice that seems geared toward the starker split between mainline dungeon runs and exploration.

The setting is The Lands Between, home to the titular Elden Ring, whose Grace once burned in the eyes of inhabitants and fueled the towering, radiant Erdtree you'll spot on the horizon. For reasons unknown, a portion of the citizenry lost this Grace many years ago and went into exile, becoming the Tarnished. As the game begins the Elden Ring lies broken, its pieces taken by the demigod offspring of Queen Marika the Eternal, who wage war on each other even as they're mutated by the Ring's power.

GRACE IN THE HOLE

Known as the Shattering, this conflict leaves most of the queendom in ruin. The old aristocracy clings on as vagrant armies parked outside looted castles. The ordinary folk have

UPS AND DOWNS

The best bits and pet peeves of our hands-on

LIKE



THE ANIMATIONS!

You can see the benefit of From's time with *Bloodborne* and *Sekiro*. The swinging and stabbing is poetry in motion.

LIKE



THE SWAG!

Nobody does eldritch outfits like From. The Raya Lucarian set makes you look like a weaponized theme-park mascot, for instance.

DISLIKE



THE STEALTH

You can click to crouch in bushes, for infrequent backstabbing. It does the job mostly, but it's perfunctory and charmless.

DISLIKE



THE LEDGE MANTLING

Or rather the lack of it. What's the point of an open world littered with sloping, ridged surfaces if I can't haul myself over a wall?

THIS CONFLICT LEAVES MOST OF THE QUEENDOM IN RUIN

become ghouls infesting the stumps of villages. The countryside teems with mercenary cavalry, shackled ogres, territorial dragons, forgotten battle golems, and wraith-like black knights. But the Ring's destruction also somehow triggers the restoration of Grace to the descendants of the Tarnished—that's you!—who are called back to their homeland to fix the mess.

There are at least two endings in store. As a returning Tarnished exile, guided by a scarred maiden called Melina, you can reclaim the Ring's shards from the demigods, eventually becoming the Elden Lord. This appears to be the main path. Or, you can dig deeper into the morass of events surrounding the Ring's destruction, perhaps investigating how your ancestors came to be banished. This route is more exploration-driven and based around deduction from lore entries, much as you had to track down certain NPCs to reach alternate endings in previous From games.

It's an atmospheric foundation, but as with the stamina-based combat, there's a sense of excavating well-trodden ground. The story supposedly features writing from George R R Martin, but this feels much more like a rerun of the *Souls* arc than *Game of Thrones*—another eldritch universe rotted by cosmic energies that must be purged of its obstinate rulers by undead pilgrims.

Parallels accumulate steadily while roaming the landscape. Dragons are once again central to the mythology: You'll find churches dedicated to them, where you can trade bits of their anatomy for seismic Incantations. Magic is color-coded by social class, much as in Lordran, Drangleic, and Lothric: Blue magic projectiles for blue-blooded wizards, righteous lightning, and golden heals for the priesthood, fireballs and bestial transformations for the weirdos in the caves. Is Grace, the metaphysical substance that binds The Lands Between together, just an analog for Fire or Humanity

in *Dark Souls*? I'm hoping that *Elden Ring* will deconstruct its influences and use the new open world format to bend them out of shape.

CHOKEPOINT-AND-CLICK

Either way, the bosses should be worth the journey. Limgrave being one of the earlier regions, its celebrity monsters are as much tutorials as adversaries. Margit the Fell Omen, or 'Git' as I've come to know him, is a classic end-of-prologue boss, designed to leverage everything you've learned from the opening hours. It's unwise to block every last one of his enormous swings—even if you succeed, you won't have much stamina left for a counterattack—so you'll need to hone your timing and dodge a certain percentage. Likewise, you can't just melt him from afar with spells—he'll jump on you or lacerate you with sorcery of his own. He's got a second, more aggressive phase involving a massive golden hammer, testing your reserves when you think you're on the home

BELOW: Honestly now, how many arms does one person need?





Sometimes all it takes is one creep with a flail.

» straight. Rolling behind him is advisable, but keep an eye on that tail.

Margit is an pushover, however, if you summon another player. Bringing allies to bossfights in FromSoftware games has always been equivalent to dropping the difficulty a few notches—even if your mates can't tell one end of a halberd from the other, they'll take some of the heat off—and I'm eager to learn if there are any bosses in *Elden Ring* designed specifically for groups. Multiplayer follows the same strokes as *Souls*: You can invade other players or be invaded by them, leaving friendly or hostile summon signs and equipping items that match you automatically under certain conditions. But there are some quality-of-life adjustments. You can invite friends to your session by setting a password, and summon signs can be remotely deposited near area-opening statues for quicker discovery. In keeping with a story about a magic ring, online players are known as Fingers—as ever with FromSoftware, multiplayer is as

much an elaboration of the narrative as it is a feature.

If your friends are weary of playing meatshield, you can also conjure the ghosts of NPCs using magical ash. One minor boss, the Grave Warden, feels like an advert for this: Deploy the Northern Mercenary ash you find in the same tomb, and you can pick at the boss from a distance while your over-muscled AI accomplice holds his attention. The same goes for Agheel, a dragon whose job is to teach you the finer points of fighting from horseback. It's possible to defeat this towering beast on foot, given a blade long enough to reach its head, but it'll swoop away at intervals, and bathe the ground in fire, making speedy strafing (and a distracting ally) vital.

ASH-KICKING

The bossfights help clarify the point that this is still an experience for fans, much as the open world stretches might seem more receptive to newcomers. *Elden Ring* isn't really an

YOU CAN INVADE OTHER PLAYERS OR BE INVADED BY THEM



easier game, but a more convenient one for seasoned fans. New checkpoint statues reduce backtracking, for example, but they don't make the marquee encounters any less terrifying. Progression, meanwhile, keeps most of the same stats, questions of weight, and poise

from the *Souls* games, but is more open-ended. You can apply new Ashes of War to weapons for different special abilities and to change which character stat the weapon uses for damage scaling.

Want to be a Greatsword-wielding mage? Apply the Ash of

War 'Gravitas' to said weapon, causing it to scale based on your Intelligence rather than your Strength. Ashes can be removed and reapplied without penalty, and the result is a game that's kinder to veterans who love optimizing a build. No longer will tailoring a playstyle be quite such a marathon; in *Elden Ring*, you can trick out your blades as the occasion demands, though you'll still need special resources to upgrade their overall stats.

Elden Ring feels most assured when it comes to these refinements. I'm hoping that the same will prove true of the setting, which is Shattered in more ways than one, its grander interiors captivating, but largely divorced from an overworld whose details I'm already struggling to remember. Whatever the outcome, this will be an engrossing project to push through and pick apart: One of gaming's greatest names, delicately adapting its house style to a genre that, on the surface, seems to go against everything it stands for. ■

RINGERS *The five classes revealed so far*



WARRIOR

From the name you might expect the classic fighter archetype, but high Dex makes these guys suited to more of an agile duelist role. Expect to dodge roll and wear enemies down with ranged attacks before going in for the kill.



CHAMPION

Another deceptive class—you'll have the look of a dumb barbarian, but they're actually more like a paladin, able to use divine magic. They start with the powerful Dragonfire spell, which is a brutal AoE attack for the early game.



BLOODY WOLF

Now that's a classy name. This is the one to pick for that classic *Dark Souls* feel—it's just a big, tough dude with a sword, a shield, and some decent armor. No special tricks or magic, just you and a bunch of metal against the world.



ENCHANTED KNIGHT

These powerful spellswords combine strength with sorcery to keep enemies at arm's length. Brawny enough to hide behind heavy armor and a solid shield, yet smart enough to blast enemies to bits with glowing energy.



PROPHET

Divine magic specialists with easily the most uncomfortable-looking armor set. They start out with the Heal spell, but also with the rather more offensive Beast Claw, a devastating magical ranged attack.

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SEEING THE

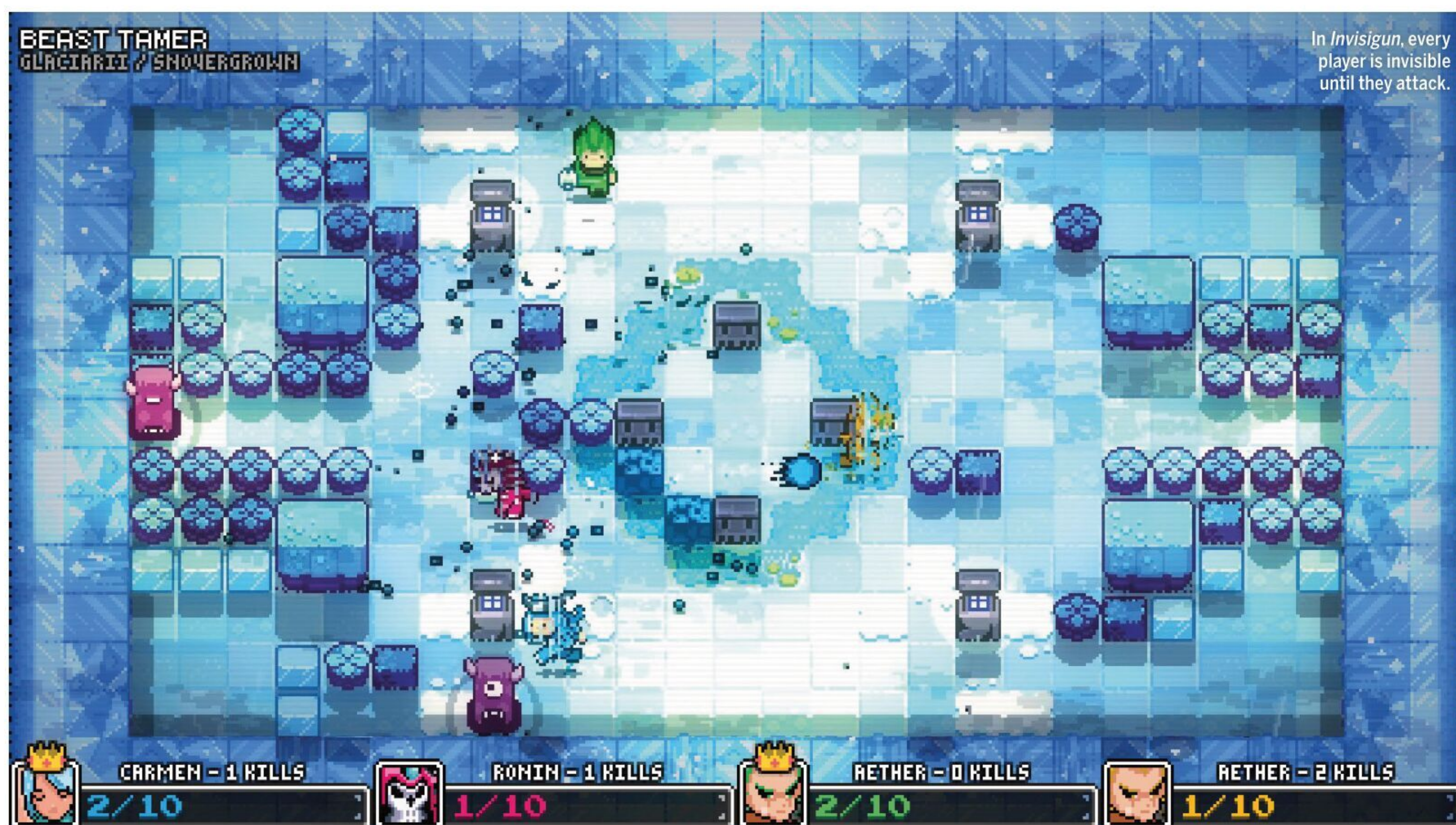
Exploring the strange and
surprising world of invisibility
in videogames.



By Edwin Evans-Thirlwell



n 1985, brothers James and Jim Thomas penned a film script, *The Hunter*, about an otherworldly creature armed with near-magical powers of camouflage. The script has a counter-intuitive take on the concept of invisibility. Rather than a mere blank spot, the Hunter exists as traces of motion without coherent form, designed to produce “a dizzying, subliminal experience” and “an intensely visual, highly emotional confrontation for the viewer.” During production, special effects teams used ‘inline mattes’ to superimpose concentric images of background foliage onto an actor. This fake translucency turns the landscape itself into an aggressor: When the Hunter or, as we know him today, the Predator finally attacks, it’s “as if the entire wall of the jungle were rushing in”.



Paid homage to in every halfway-stealthy game from *Crysis* to *Deathloop*, the Predator is the nearest we have to a patron saint of invisibility in games. The weirdness of invisibility in the film—not just a Clancy-esque gizmo, but an assault on the viewer’s consciousness—reflects the startlingly varied forms invisibility takes in different species of game. Invisibility can be the ultimate power fantasy, as anybody who’s ever been brain-jacked by Sombra in *Overwatch* can attest. By extension, it can be a nightmare to balance, whether you’re designing a PvP shooter or simulating the reactions of AI guards to a cloaked invader. But it can also be an atmospheric device, a source of dread and uncanniness even in the mind of the camouflaged player. At its most arcane, it speaks to a long association between computer technology and magic, between feats of

stage illusion and the ocular tricks all videogames necessarily consist of.

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

Among the *Predator*’s least expected descendants is Maid Marian or rather, Marianne, one of the playable characters in Sumo Newcastle’s bloodthirsty medieval heist game *Hood: Outlaws & Legends*. A grisly retelling of English folklore, *Hood* is all about completing objectives undetected: Two teams of four must escape with a treasure chest while quietly murdering each other and fending off AI guards who double as a map-wide surveillance system, flagging anybody they spot on the enemy team’s HUD. Marianne is the team’s assassin (Robin Hood, of course, is the sniper), and while she doesn’t have infrared vision, she’s every bit as fearsome in the right hands as the interplanetary terror she’s inspired by.

Hood’s AI is slower to notice Marianne than other characters, and her passive Shadow ability lets her perform assassinations from the front. She can also toss smoke bombs to set up multiple targets for a takedown. But her most devastating trick is Shroud, which untags her and turns her character model semi-transparent. “We wanted it to almost feel like God mode,” says Andrew Willans, game director. “This ability that allows her to literally to walk in front of AI to assassinate them and chain those assassinations together

**THE PREDATOR
IS THE NEAREST
WE HAVE TO A
PATRON SAINT OF
INVISIBILITY
IN GAMES**

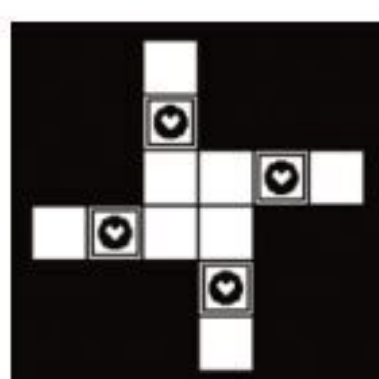
HIDDEN AND DANGEROUS

More clever examples of invisibility in games



SCREENCHEAT

Old school splitscreen shooter in which everyone’s invisible—so you can only see where others are by looking at their screen.



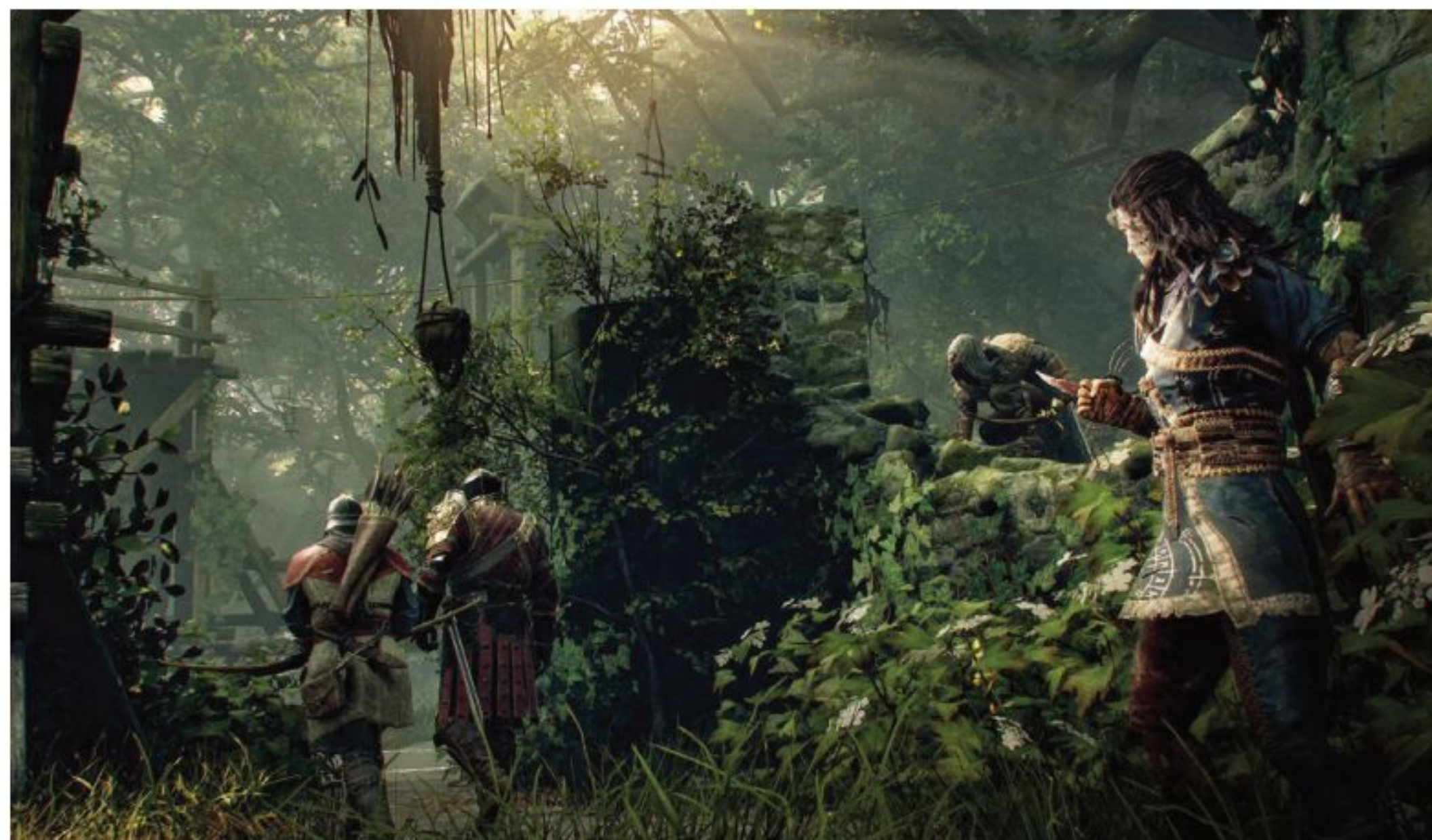
INVISIBLE ELEPHANT

A puzzle game where you move an invisible object around a grid map with movable blocks, then see if you can deduce and draw its shape.



CRYSIS

Your nanosuit’s stealth mode turns you translucent, but watch out—your recharging power reserve is small.



Maid Marian is reimagined as a deadly assassin in *Hood: Outlaws & Legends*.

» using perks, so that hopefully when you get into the flow, it's like shiv shiv shiv, one after another, and the AI just has this delayed response, 'Ooh, Steve's just been killed', but they can never quite pinpoint you."

Designing Shroud to work against AI was straightforward enough, Willans says. Designing it to feel fair in PvP was a different story. "I think that was probably one of the hardest things throughout development to get right." Sumo experimented with total invisibility, but this proved "impossible" for opponents, "so it was kind of working back from there." Some early prototypes for Shroud were downright horrifying. "We had a bug for about three months where her eyes stayed visible while cloaked. It looked so sinister—now *that* was truly the Predator."

VIEW TO A KILL

A pivotal moment for Sumo was remembering that the *Predator* is much more apparent in motion. The creature's camouflage acts like a camera lens running over the backdrop, distorting the scenery. The challenge then became to decide exactly how transparent Marianne's Shroud should be—and how much control players should have over the effect. "She's roughly 50% [transparent] with her base ability," says Willans. "If you use a perk, you can actually increase that

to more like 75-80." The *Hood* team also drew on the lessons of *Eve: Valkyrie*, its VR space dogfighting game for CCP Games, which features a stealth ship influenced by the cloaking Klingon warships in *Star Trek*. In *Valkyrie* as in *Hood*, the faster you travel the more conspicuous the shimmer of the background through your craft.

Marianne's invisibility formed part of a larger conversation during development about immersiveness and mood. Sumo considered adding a visibility gauge, akin to *Thief's* light gem, but removed this for a couple of reasons, one being an inevitable gap between HUD feedback and what other players could actually see. "People would look at the user interface, and they'd go, 'all right, I'm safe. I'm in darkness', and then somebody comes up behind them and cracks them on the head, and [they're] like, where did that come from?" But Sumo also wanted to cultivate an atmosphere of dread, even in the mind of a hidden player. "I like to leave a little bit of ambiguity there," Willans says. "[So] that there's a bit of tension for you, even as the assassin—am I hidden enough? You almost want to get one of your mates to check—can you see me? Can you see the whites of my eyes? Can see the glint on my weapon?" Grounding the stealth in what players perceive makes *Hood's* strangely ahistorical setting more convincing, of course. "If you're hiding behind a tree which is breaking line of sight, that feels more natural than [saying that] you're crouched in a bush and are now fully invisible to other players."

You might expect *Battlefield*, the definitive photorealistic military shooter, to have similarly elaborate ideas about camouflage, but in a game of large-scale PvP with a fanbase of millions, questions of balance take priority. The recent *Battlefield 2042's* reconnaissance 'specialists' may seem dressed to blend in quicker than other types of soldier. Take Casper, described in-game as a "master of camouflage": He sports a ghillie suit, an iconic variety of stealth gear which uses long strips of cloth, twine, and foliage to break

SPECIAL STAGE

Feats of illusion, shared by Mariano Tomatis



PHANTASMAGORIA ETIENNE-GASPARD ROBERTSON

One of Robertson's tricks used a black shutter that could be rotated to view a space with a black backdrop. By rotating the shutter, people behind it appeared to disappear.



PEPPER'S TRICK JOHN HENRY PEPPER

Working with the engineer Henry Dircks, Pepper used a glass sheet to conjure ghosts. Reflections of actors in a hidden room would appear on-stage when



THE VANISHING LADY GEORGES MELIÈS

One of the earliest demonstrations of the magic of film editing, based on a famous stage trick involving a hidden trapdoor. Here, no trapdoor is needed.

up the wearer's profile against matching scenery. But as I learned during a discussion with the multiplayer design team, DICE wanted every character in the game to have the same "baseline for visibility", ghillie suit or no.

UNIFORM APPEAL

The game's generous spread of camo patterns are more about visual variety—and, reading between the lines, microtransactions—than letting players seek tactical advantage. In practice, stealthy characters in *Battlefield 2042* are distinguished less by their ability to hide than by their ability to spot and tag using UAVs and sensors.

DICE has, however, flirted with invisibility modes at times in *Battlefield*'s tumultuous history. *Battlefield 2042* is the gritty, near-future 'sequel' to *Battlefield 2142*, a work of outright science fiction featuring an active camouflage gadget that renders the wielder up to 90% transparent. Where *Hood* riffs on Predator, DICE's primary inspiration was anime film *Ghost in the Shell*, whose cyborg protagonist has thermo-optic mesh for skin. This idea of invisibility is far-fetched, but not impossible: Real-world active camo technologies exist that continuously adapt an object's appearance to resemble its environment, such as Ray Alden's 2001 US patent for a "cloaking process" made up of segmented pixels.

Active camo in *Battlefield 2142* comes with hefty constraints. The device has a short-lived battery, gives off a telltale whine when activated, stands out more in well-lit chambers, and can't be wielded alongside a gun. But even given these drawbacks, it is an eerie and compelling tool of

war—warping the environment behind it, and so encouraging both user and victim to think harder about the game's light levels and play of indoor and outdoor spaces. *Hood's* Shroud ability takes this further: To survive Marianne's attentions, you must ceaselessly monitor light sources, corners, or high-contrast foliage for that telltale ripple of interference.

Playing as Marianne, you grow conscious of how the Shroud interacts with certain textures or colors, and how conspicuous you are based on relative position and motion, providing you can see yourself at all. "This is something that I struggle with even now in the game," Willans says. "When I use her perk to make her even more invisible, like 75% transparency, I lose connection with the character—suddenly I'm kind of just looking for an input that says 'assassinate'. I'm less connected with the game world. So you know, it's all psychological."

GRID VERSUS EGO

That eerie sense of disconnection is integral to *Invisigun*, Sombr Studio's same-screen top-down blaster in which every player is invisible by default. Characters pop into view when firing or using their special abilities, but are otherwise only perceptible when they interact with the terrain—brushing through foliage, splashing in puddles and leaving footprints in snow. >>

**CHARACTERS
POP INTO VIEW
WHEN FIRING
OR USING
THEIR SPECIAL
ABILITIES**

Active camo in *Battlefield 2142* was limited but powerful.



» *Invisigun*'s lead programmer, designer and audio engineer Shadi Muklashy came up with the concept while working on mech shooter *Hawken*, which features an invisibility device. Earlier versions of the game used analog movement, but this was confusing. "It was almost impossible to sneak around without bumping into anything, and while it was fun, it lacked precision and strategy. One of my game design friends suggested movement on a grid, with the rationale being that since invisibility is a challenging concept for the player, simplifying everything else would help."

The addition of the grid proved transformative. It allows you to deduce your movements by counting the steps from your last known position, turning an exercise in shooting first into a game of careful measurement and misdirection with a generous pinch of gut instinct—a wholly different way of using the environment in an arcade shooter. Muklashy invokes the concept of 'yomi' in competitive fighting games like *Street Fighter*. "[It] roughly translates to mind-reading, or knowing what your opponent is thinking and playing strategically in response. There's a back-and-forth dance throughout fighting game matches where the concept of yomi can snowball and shift dramatically as players learn each other's tendencies. I like to think that *Invisigun* has unlimited yomi due to the invisibility. Some players can make their opponents panic by simply doing nothing at all!"

Where *Sumo*'s challenge with Marianne in *Hood* was to balance her Shroud ability for PvP, Muklashy's big hurdle with *Invisigun* was preserving this element of mind-reading when designing bot behavior. "Everything the player does broadcasts 'disturbance' events, such as bumping into walls or stepping through puddles. The bots will notice the location of these events and work their way towards that location and possibly attempt to shoot towards that spot. Depending on the type of disturbance, they will seek out either an exact location, or a rough estimate within a certain radius when they reach line of sight to that spot."

Locking movement to a grid made things easier here too "since disturbance locations are often exact, and path-finding algorithms on a grid are straightforward." *Invisigun* bots have moments of believable disorientation or uncertainty,

depending on their skill level. "There are tolerances and random ranges for almost everything they do. This could be their reaction time when responding to a disturbance, to every once in a while making a misstep or two [...] to even not 'remembering' the precise spot they are seeking."

DECOY POLLOI

Thinking about how a player or enemy should feel about an invisible foe opens the way to thinking about invisibility not as a weapon, but an unacknowledged cousin of stage illusion—reliant on manipulating your states of mind as much as the limits of human perception. Digital artist and researcher Mariano Tomatis links the disappearing and reappearing tricks performed by magicians such as John Henry Pepper to modern heads-up displays on car windshields and augmented reality headsets. Both, he points out, are essentially the result of cunning combinations of light and glass. Tomatis also makes connections between military tech and stagecraft: Take dazzle camouflage in naval warfare, designed to confuse observers about the type of ship under scrutiny. This too is "based on the same principles used to decorate props involved in stage magic tricks".

Videogames featuring invisibility and camouflage inherit this strange, ancient relationship between gadgetry and sorcery, summed up by the famous Arthur C Clarke quote that "any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic". In a more immediate sense, videogames are all feats of illusion magic themselves. "All stage magic is based on an invisible ingredient—the trick," Tomatis notes. This is no less true of virtual worlds: All are generated from the unseen workings of computer code, and not even the most expensive and painstaking simulations are literally and exactly what they appear to be.

One game that embraces the strangeness of this is *Nix Umbra*, a first-person horror ritual set in an enchanted forest. Visible only by the short-ranged glare of your flaming sword, the game's world is randomly generated: Its

"IT ROUGHLY
TRANSLATES TO
MIND READING, OR
KNOWING WHAT
YOUR OPPONENT
IS THINKING"



In *Rain*, both you and your enemies are invisible except in a downpour.





Deathloop's arsenal of supernatural powers includes invisibility.

horror comes from not knowing how much of the unseen landscape really exists to be interacted with, and how much has yet to be conjured. "It's that uncertainty of what secrets the world is hiding from you that make me want to play a game," says ilzard, the game's sole developer. "Also there is a sense of wonder of discovering things by yourself without being told how it works." The developer describes *Nix Umbra* as a work of the "occult", a term that stems from the Latin for concealment. "I tried to build everything on top of this concept and to let the players try to bring to light its mechanics with each new death."

GROVING THREAT

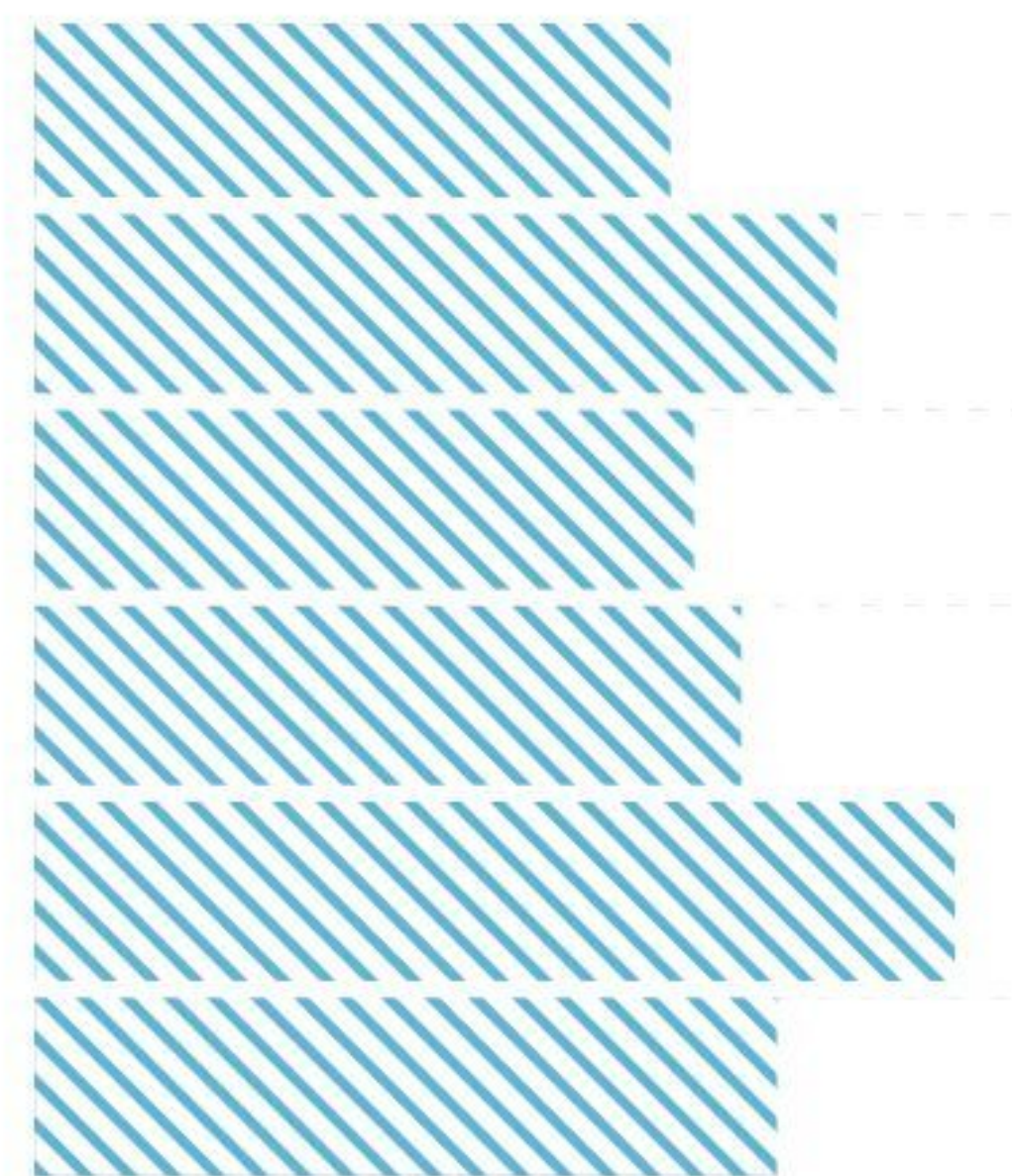
It would be a shame to spoil too much of *Nix Umbra*, but suffice it to say that certain... entities

are invisible even in the light of your sword, their presence telegraphed by screen distortion and trees bursting into flame.

"I was interested in making something abstract," ilzard explains. "So it is not so much a creature in the traditional sense [but] the concept of death itself that I wanted to project. When 'death' is close, flashing lights, subliminal skulls and kaleidoscopic shapes starts to assault your vision." These 'psychedelic visual stimuli'—which riff as much on surrealist or folk horror cinema as the likes of *Amnesia* or *Slender*—are

designed to turn your imagination against you. As with the Predator, it's like the forest itself is closing in.

Invisibility in games, is about more than avoiding detection. It's a complex ambient device that cuts to the heart of videogames as a technological art form. Visualizing equipment like active camo, ensuring foes are just perceptible enough, and imagining how bots should respond—all these challenges invite haunting questions about our interactions with virtual worlds that are fundamentally works of the unseen. ■



LOOK TWICE

A few of our favorite invisibility-busting tools



HEAT VISION

The Predator's other signature gadget, cherished by any stealth-oriented shooter. Useful for tracking down cloaked adversaries.



BOLTS

The world of *STALKER* is full of invisible and often deadly anomalies. Fortunately, you can always lob rusty bolts at suspicious areas to trigger them safely.



CAMERA OBSCURA

Fatal Frame's chunky antique snapper is your only means of sensing, destroying, or communicating with the ghosts that riddle each game's landscape.



WATER

Among the worst of *Amnesia: The Dark Descent*'s bogeys is the invisible Kaernk. Listen out for the splash of feet as you explore those castle cisterns.

BRUTE FORCE

HALO INFINITE comes frustratingly close to greatness

By Nat Clayton

Does an open world work for *Halo*? Since its announcement, that question is one that's been constantly asked of *Halo Infinite*. Six years after *Halo 5* left the series on a sour note, 343 Industries has dusted off the Master Chief's armor for a throwback to Bungie's original—nostalgic for a time when *Halo* was just a big green man, his blue, holographic girlfriend, and a wide open ring full of possibilities to explore.

What this results in is a game that could be a true return to form for Master Chief—but I'm just not convinced *Halo* really needed to be an open world.

Let's make one thing clear though: This is some darn fine *Halo*. Having played *Halo 3* with the lads every weekend for the last year, *Infinite* comes as a breath of fresh air. Running and gunning in *Halo* has never felt this good, Master Chief moving with a real heft even as he slides and mantles his way across ancient alien amphitheaters.

Halo Infinite's multiplayer gave us a taste of this, launching a month ahead of the story proper. But where the game's arsenal feels a little flat in team slayer, the campaign helps even the flimsiest weapons shine thanks to a menagerie of alien baddies with unique behaviors. Weapon types have

never felt more important, especially on harder difficulties (I played through on Heroic), and juggling between bursting shields with plasma, busting skulls with kinetic, and stunning foes with shock weapons becomes crucial. It helps that every weapon feels great, snapping and popping and busting with satisfying sounds.

Infinite's firefights feel electric, hectic, a

constant grab-bag of finding the next best tool (even if that means tossing a nearby plasma barrel at a pack of Grunts). But none of this comes close to the sheer absolute thrill of the grappling hook. *Infinite* immediately hands you a length of rope with which to fling yourself around Zeta Halo with.

At first you're pulling yourself out of enemy fire and grappling vehicles, but a few upgrades will turn it into a

That grapple is also essential for exploring *Halo Infinite*'s open world

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An open world sequel in the long-running shooter series

EXPECT TO PAY
\$60

DEVELOPER
343 Industries

PUBLISHER
Xbox Game Studios

REVIEWED ON
RTX 2070 SUPER, Ryzen 5 3600, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
bit.ly/3DNxehH

deadly electric wire that shocks unshielded baddies and lets you slam-dunk entire packs of foes with a tap of the melee button. This comes at the cost of making the rest of the equipment feel a little redundant, mind. Changing equipment on the fly is a hassle and, honestly, you're always best served with the utility of a simple hooked rope.

RING ROAD

That grapple is also essential for exploring *Halo Infinite*'s open world. Introduced after two more traditionally linear missions, *Infinite* introduces you to the open-ish plains of Zeta Halo. But while your AI sidekick (more on her later) immediately floods your map screen with icons, don't be fooled. This isn't *Far Cry: Ringworld*—in fact, you'll find the open world to be surprisingly small.

Instead, these activities feel more like diversions between main story missions. While heading to your next plot beat you might find a squad of marines to rescue, or an FOB (bases from which to fast travel and summon weapons and vehicles) to capture. They're fun, but incidental—and while the larger strongholds provide a more structured challenge, I rarely felt the pull to break off from the main path to devote time to them.

See, *Halo* doesn't lend itself well to a drip-feed of unlocks. Main story missions are tightly controlled and rarely let you just rock up with a tank. Powerful weapon variations can be acquired by taking down high-value targets in the open world, but levels are constantly throwing completely different challenges in your face. Why cling onto a long-range Sidekick variant when a mission just tossed you into a pit of beefed-up Elites?

There's perhaps one mission that makes use of the open world structure, a mid-game level that tasks you with crossing kilometers of space to infiltrate Forerunner beacons

REQUIRED READING

Catch up on your Halo before stepping into Infinite



HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED

2001
Infinite's forest valleys are a throwback to the series' debut, a simpler time. While linear, it's clear to see how you could push these expansive levels into an open world.



HALO 4

2012
After a full trilogy and two spin-offs, Bungie hands the series over to new studio 343. The universe is reset with a new cast, a new ship, and the sense that not all is well with Chief's holo girlfriend Cortana.



HALO 5: GUARDIANS

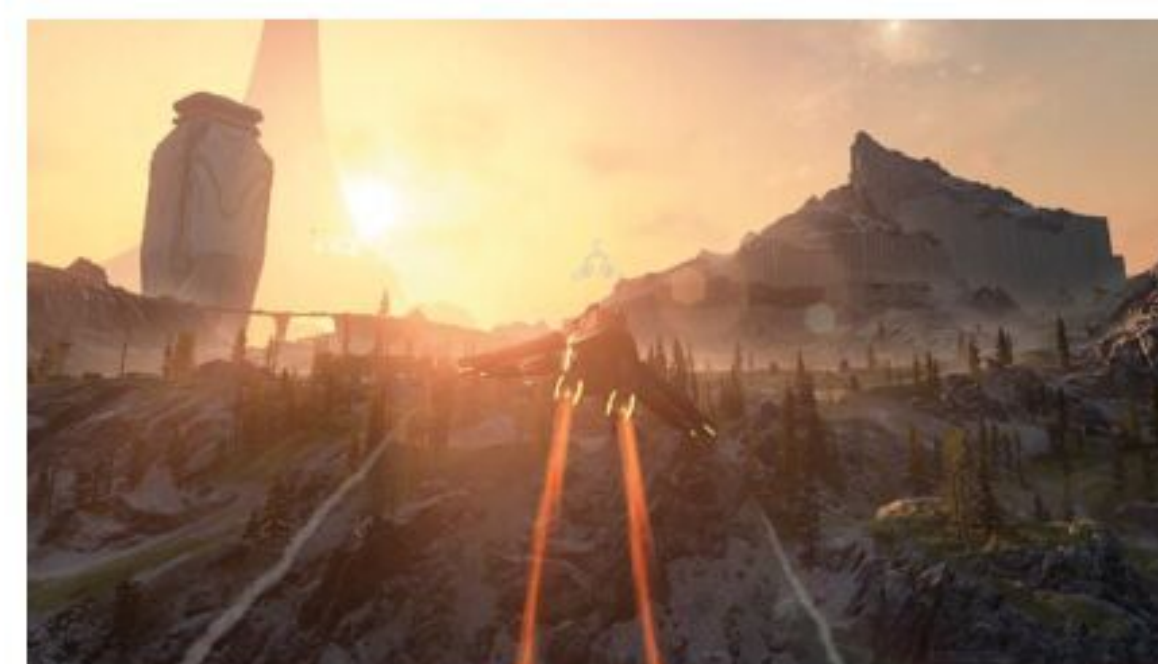
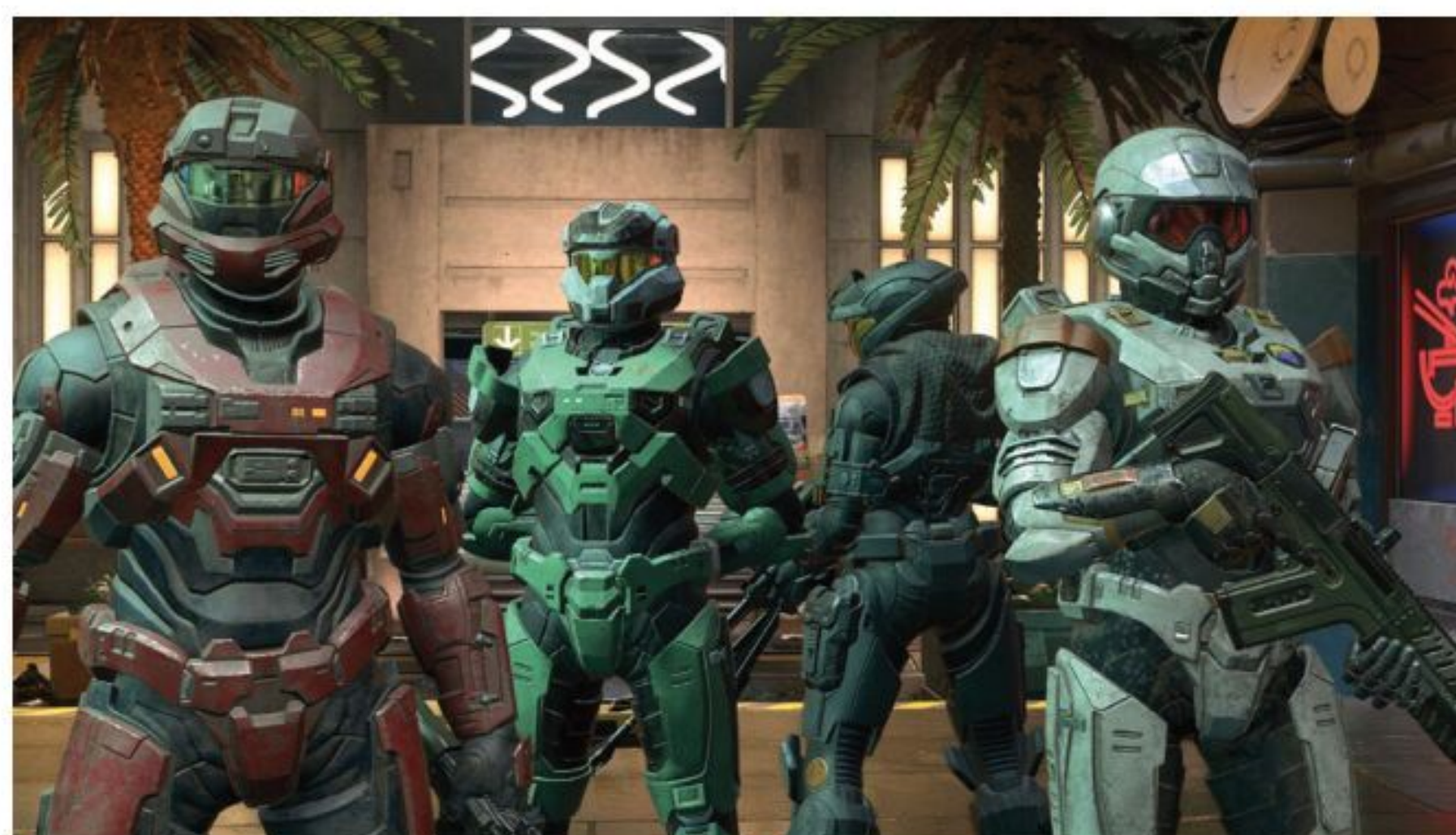
2015
The last we saw of the Chief, *Halo 5* ends with Cortana going full fash, taking over the galaxy with an army of ancient robots. There's also a whole 'has the Chief gone rogue' arc that doesn't really go anywhere.



HALO WARS 2

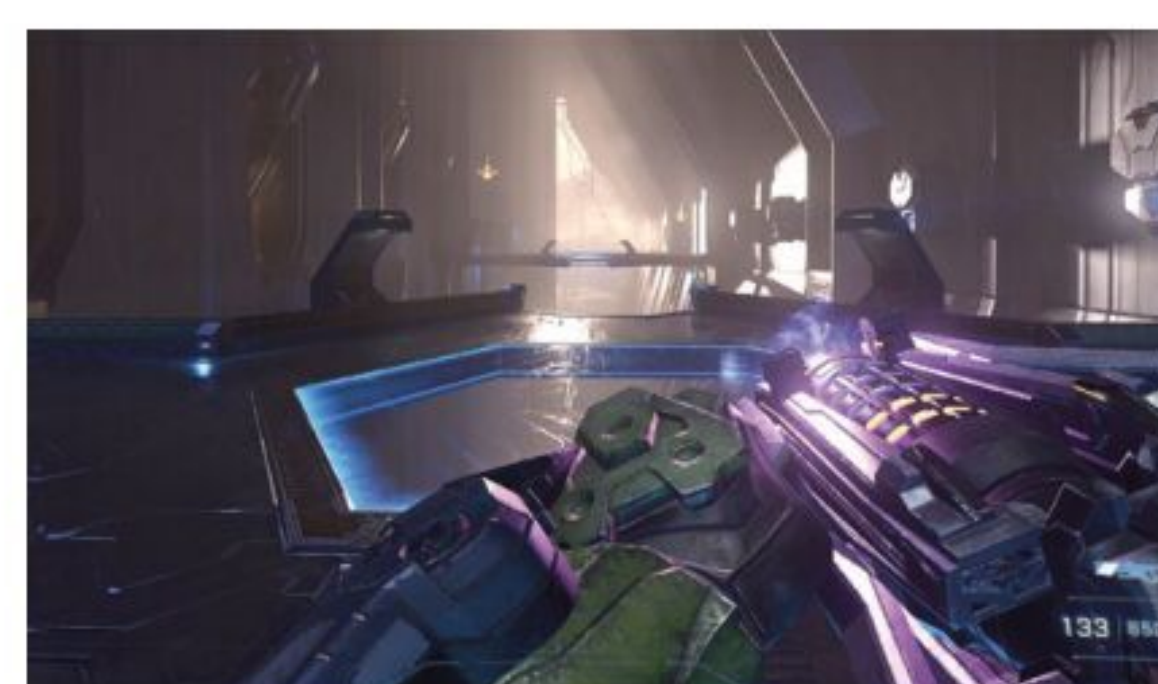
2017
Infinite largely hand-waves all that AI apocalypse nonsense and reintroduces the Banished, a successor faction of Covenant baddies pulled from Creative Assembly's RTS spin-off sequel.

Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker



LEFT: The banshee might be hot garbage, but it's the best way to get around.

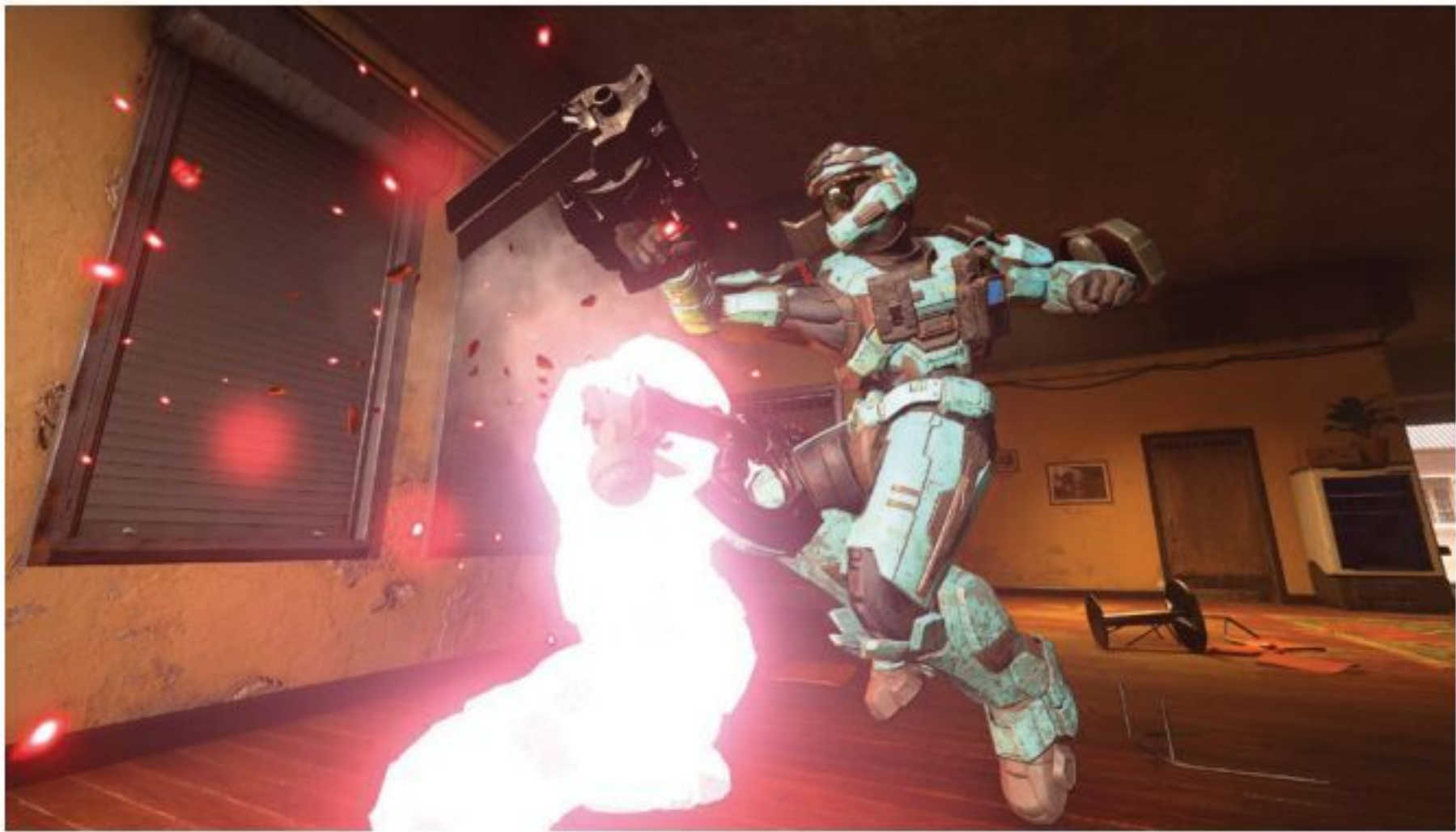
BELOW: What's better than this, just guys being dudes?



Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker



Chief's got a new blue sidekick living in his head.



RIGHT: Rings within rings within rings.



BELOW: The Mangler does exactly what it says on the tin.



Infinite's map is small, but packed with little diversions.



Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker

» fiercely held by Banished forces. It's here where all those toys you may have unlocked can finally come into play—one final effort at an open world *Halo*, before *Infinite* sort of gives up on pretending to be an open world entirely in its final hours.

HALO FINITE

But *Halo Infinite* is still an open world, and even when it guns back into a more traditional pace in the latter half, it can't escape that structure. The Forerunners must have loved their trip to Seattle, because *Infinite*'s world is all minor variations on the same Pacific Northwest environment. Because the story needs to take place within this small chunk of Zeta Halo (less an expansive ringworld and more a modest national park), missions can't break off into desert vistas, frozen valleys, or dense urban warzones. Enter a mission, and you're guaranteed it'll be some combination of pine forests and pristine Forerunner structures.

Don't get me wrong, it's a beautiful forest. *Infinite* is a gorgeous game, omitting the overdesigned characters and environments of 343's previous games to create a well-considered evolution of Bungie's visuals. Forests are thriving with wildlife, grass sways in the breeze, and Forerunner structures feel suitably imposing. That ring on the horizon is physical, interacting with the sun and casting long shadows across itself.

But that familiarity robs missions of a unique identity, and after finishing the game the only one that really stands in my memory is a late-game level in a particularly fun Banished facility. The open world's lush forests, valleys, and marine-rescue setup may strongly evoke *Halo* (the mission) from *Halo* (the 2001 series debut), but none of the main missions stand up against the timeless design of The Silent Cartographer, or even *Halo 3*'s less fondly remembered meat labyrinth, Cortana (er, again, the mission).

In the moment, level and encounter design is great. 343 is so careful to make sure fights never feel overly familiar, always throwing new pain points into the mix. There are even moments that call back to highs from earlier games—fending off

Sentinels from a painfully slow gondola, tearing down valleys in a Scorpion tank. But there's nothing as spectacular as the time *Halo 3* dropped two building-sized Scarabs on top of you and told you to just figure it out.

Instead, *Infinite* has boss fights, and they're decent, if a little uninspired. But there's a special place

in hell for a pair of Brutes you're forced to face in an open ditch—one riding a souped-up Chopper while the other nukes you with artillery fire, summoning extra baddies when either is defeated.

**Unless you're
clued in on *Halo*
5 the story is a
hot confusing
mess.**

THE LOUD CARTOGRAPHER

But the biggest frustration is that, for as much as *Infinite* has been earmarked as a throwback to the series' roots, 343 can't shed 20 years of lore baggage. It's frustrating, because at the root of the game is the relationship between Chief, the UNSC pilot who rescues him at the game's opening, and The Weapon—an AI modelled after Cortana after Cortana went all galactic dictator-god at the end of *Halo 5*.

At its heart, this dynamic works! Chief is starting to feel tired after all these years of being a video game hero, but his need for heroics and duty creates a wonderful tension with a pilot who is at the absolute end of his tether. The Weapon often risks coming across as gratingly naïve, but she feels like a knowing throwback to the first *Halo*'s version of Cortana—a friendly voice to accompany you through ancient ruins and apocalyptic schemes. A family can be a big green man,

his blue holographic partner, and a nervous wreck at the helm of a 130-ton dropship, and that's okay.

They're a good foundation for a story, but unless you're clued in on *Halo 5* the story is a hot confusing mess. The Banished simply aren't interesting baddies, a straight reskin of the Covenant only redder and meaner, but they soon share the stage with 343's favorite trope. *Halo*'s established ancient aliens, the Forerunners, aren't mysterious anymore, so we're introduced to a new ancient alien who has a grudge against the Forerunners and, by proxy, humanity.

Any mystery *Halo* used to hold has been lost under a deluge of proper nouns and thousand-year machinations, and keeping track of it is exhausting. But when all is said and done, the story isn't even really about the Banished, or the Harbinger, or the Endless. It's about Master Chief and Cortana, a relationship that even with the latter's absence, drives everything our big green man does throughout the game. Truth be told, it's not a relationship that's ever worked for me.

FIGHT FINISHED

Infinite wants to kick off a new era of *Halo* by asking why we fell in love with it in the first place. Exploring the open world after wrapping the campaign is a joy, exploring nooks and crannies for secrets, basking in the alien beauty of watching the sun set behind the ring, and rising on the other side of it moments later. Wrapping up all those side missions I skipped and admitting that they probably were best left until now, when I'm done with the story, but still hankering for some good fights.

For lapsed fans of the Bungie games like me, *Halo Infinite* is a strong return to form, and in the heat of battle it's the best running and gunning the series has ever had. It's painfully easy to imagine a world where *Infinite* could have easily been one of my favorite entries to date. But between a redundant open world and a story that can't shed the series' baggage, *Halo Infinite*'s campaign falls just shy of being a great *Halo*. ■

PC GAMER

VERDICT

Infinite can't deliver on its open world ambitions, but it's a solid entry with the best shooting the series has ever seen.

78

CUSTOM HARDWARE

The weapons you know, but different



MA40 LONGSHOT

The basic assault rifle is good. It's very good. But this version packs a meaner punch at a longer range, and is a must-have for any Spartan.



UNBOUND PLASMA PISTOL

Even the humble plasma pistol gets a souped up variant, charging faster, and unleashing a shotgun spread of devastating bolts.



M41 TRACKER

Rockets are hard to come by, so make sure you never waste another shot with a homing variant of the trusty rocket launcher pulled out of *Halo 2*.

SHIPSHAPE

Watch this space, I'm pulling off sweet moves in spaceship RPG **CHORUS**

By Tom Sykes

Having six degrees of freedom is not as freeing as it might appear. Take spaceship combat, the exciting process of spewing lasers at enemies. For every successfully landed shot, there's a whole lot of endlessly swerving to keep those fighter ships in view. It can be exhausting; sometimes I dread the arrival of a fleet, rather than being excited for the dogfight. Enter *Chorus*, a game that makes spaceship combat fast and thrilling.

Rather than constantly tilting your ship to follow the enemy, here you have a touch of physics-defying magic that lets you 'drift' like you're in a sports car. Pretty soon you're using your Jedi-esque powers to disrupt shields and batter the enemy with Void-powered attacks. With its physics and suite of useful abilities, *Chorus* is the most pumped I've felt playing a dogfighting game.

To set the scene a little: It's the grim, humorless future, and a cult named The Circle has taken over the galaxy, using ruthless tactics and powers drawn from an alien source. You play as Nara, formerly a high-ranking Circle pilot who swapped sides to the Resistance, and who is now on a mission to take the

whole dang empire down. You do this by zipping around in Forsa, your sentient spaceship, taking on quests in a clutch of sizeable open spaces.

Structurally, *Chorus* resembles an open-world RPG—let's say *The Witcher 3*, as it's also broken up into

separate zones. These zones aren't simply blobs of empty space; you'll explore asteroid fields, planet rims, and distant alien temples, each lit up by colorful space phenomena and littered with sidequests.

The most pumped I've felt playing a dogfighting game

Quests, as you might expect, generally involve shooting enemy ships, though other objectives are always thrown into the mix. While not *Witcher* level, *Chorus'* quests are still a step above the dry bounty hunts you'll find in most spaceship sims. That's thanks to

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

An open world space game where you pilot a sentient ship

EXPECT TO PAY
\$40

DEVELOPER
Deep Silver Fishlabs

PUBLISHER
Deep Silver

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-10750H,
16GB RAM, GeForce
RTX 2060

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
chorusthegame.com

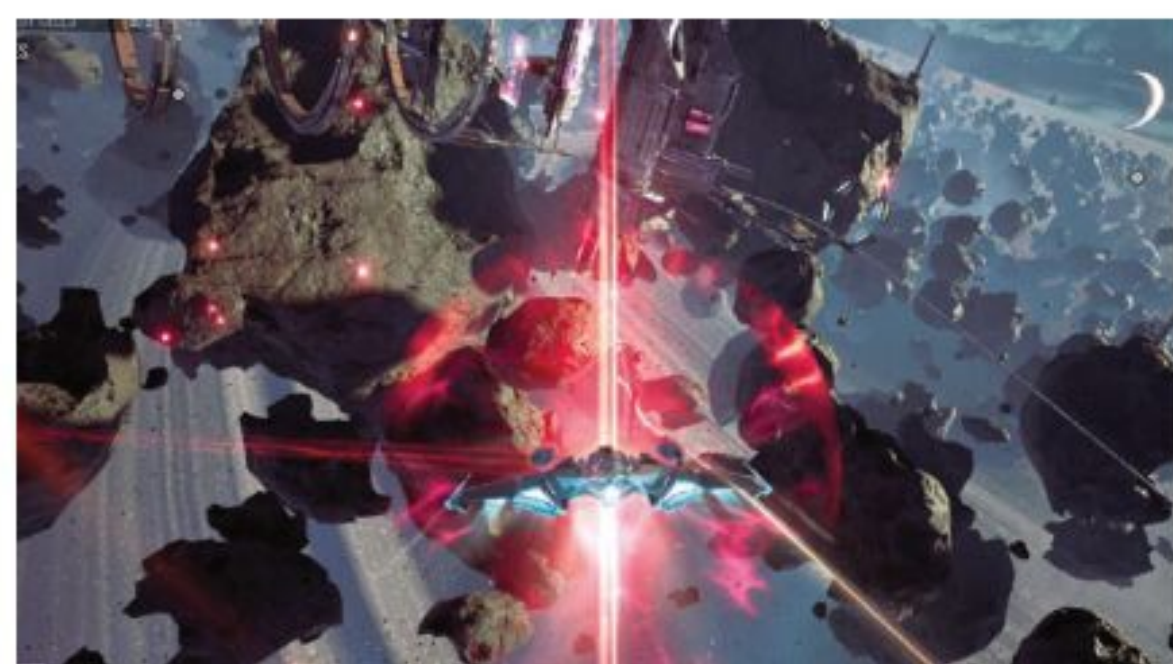
Nara, whose breathlessly whispered inner monologue adds context to proceedings. Far from a silent protagonist, you spend the game inside her head, as she processes her guilt over her former life.

I wouldn't say the story, characters, or setting are particularly standout, but I enjoyed *Chorus'* mixture of mysticism and hard sci-fi. This peaks in the alien temples, which feature a monolithic brutality that will make the team behind *Control* jealous. Here, you fly frustrating gauntlets to acquire new abilities, which steadily make the exciting combat even better.

CIRCLE JERKS

At least on the normal difficulty, combat makes great demands of you, requiring mastery of your abilities and the most up-to-date ship modules. Even then, I found myself reloading far too many times. Even the most thrilling battles can become grueling through repetition.

Chorus is the sort of game where checkpoints and autosaves are two different things. The former occur frequently, but these checkpoints count for nothing if you quit the



TOP: There are three weapon types.

RIGHT: One power lets you teleport behind enemy ships.





ABOVE: Nara can sense and replay memories.

game. Autosaves are more infrequent, generally bookending the quests—and you can't save manually during quests, before you ask. But my biggest gripe is an annoyingly mundane one: It's too damned difficult to find stuff, much of the time.

One of your powers, Rite of the Senses, highlights notables in the world, be they sidequests or tiny objectives like floating crates. The idea is that these will be highlighted, then you'll saunter over and pick them up. But they only seem to light up when you get close.

To clarify: These crates are *specks*. Sometimes they're buried in an ocean of space debris. Meanwhile, as Douglas Adams said, space is *big*. It only happened a couple of times that I was forced to fly around for *aeons*, spamming the scan button till these specks lit up, but that was a couple of times too many. More often, I'd take ten minutes trying to locate tiny 'psychic totems' to wrap up battles.

While *Chorus* stumbles with these finer details, I'm hopeful they can be patched out. The game is far better at the big picture, presenting beautiful space vistas that are a joy to fly and shoot your way around. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Chorus is a beautiful, if frustrating space adventure that excels when it comes to its fighter ship combat.

81

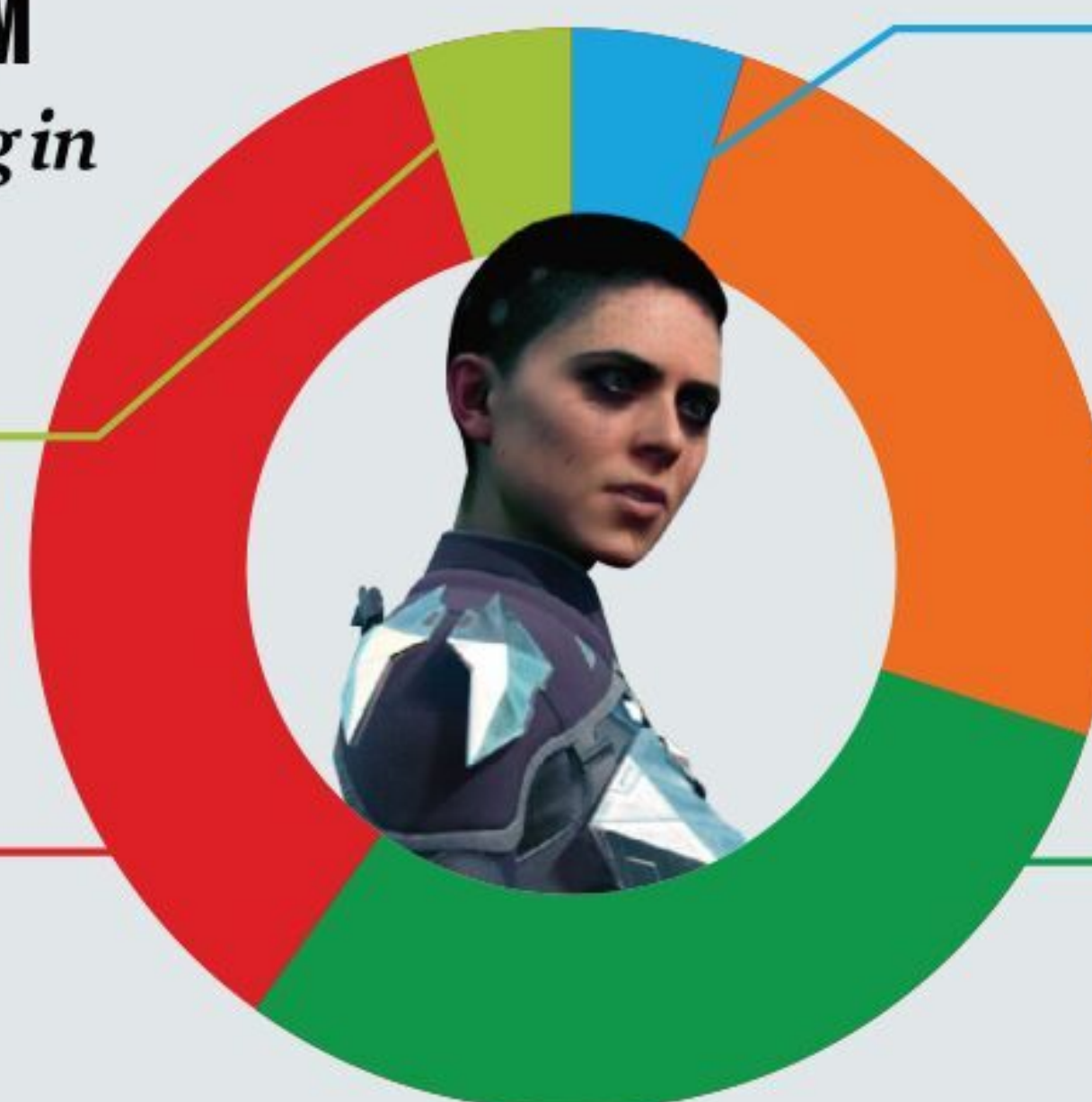


SPACE JAM

Who's singing in this choir?

5%
CONTROL
Aliens love brutality.

35%
FREELANCER
Chorus has a similarly streamlined control system.



5%
STAR WARS
Fewer aliens, and no lightsabers, but you're basically a Jedi.

25%
THE WITCHER 3
Swap nekkers for pirates, Roach for a talking spaceship.

30%
BATTLESTAR GALACTICA
The setting's not as interesting, but the combat evokes BSG.

SKATE LIMBO

Despite neat visuals and tricks, **SOLAR ASH** falls short of its influences

By Samantha Greer

Style and substance feel opposed in *Solar Ash*, Heart Machine's follow-up to the acclaimed *Hyper Light Drifter*. It has an abundance of the former, but a vacuum where the latter should be. Visual novelty and slickness keep it skating along but it never manages to fill that void, no matter how many outlandish set pieces, stylish transitions and beautiful landscapes it conjures.

You play as Rei, a 'voidrunner' who plunges herself into a blackhole to activate a MacGuffin called the 'Starseed', which we're told can save her planet, which is currently caught in the singularity's grasp. Inside this black hole is a dreamlike landscape rendered in soft clouds and goopy surfaces, all of it in bold colors. This is the 'ultravoids' as the game calls it. It's delightfully tactile, with Rei plunging into the candyfloss-like hills as she lands, or pulls some of the sticky mass behind her as she jumps. Even the collectables, plasma, are rendered as blobs of liquid. The world feels ephemeral, as if it's doomed to be washed away. It's a palpable mood, enhanced by sheer scale and verticality—a world of massive planetoids suspended in space, clinging to each other via clouds or thin rails.

The world feels ephemeral, as if it's doomed to be washed away

POP SQUISH-IT

If the world feels 'wet' then so too does movement, with inertia carrying you through slips and slides as you skate. Chain the skates with grinding on rails and eventually the game does allow you some serious momentum. Picking up speed to throw yourself over the crest of a hill or round a corner, lashing out at enemies on the go, is where the game comes alive. In those moments *Solar Ash* captures a

roller-coaster energy, letting you barrel across alien landscapes with confidence. Anyone who's done any skating in real life, especially on ice, will appreciate how much it captures that particular exhilaration, even if it's far more easily earned.

New areas slowly get bigger and much more open, so as your skill grows so do the playgrounds that are available to you. Some personal

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
An action adventure skating hybrid from the creators of *Hyper Light Drifter*

EXPECT TO PAY
\$20

DEVELOPER
Heart Machine

PUBLISHER
Annapurna Interactive

REVIEWED ON
64-Bit Windows 7, Nvidia GeForce GTX-970, Intel i7-4790K, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
bit.ly/3IVxtMX

favorites were an area of floating shipwrecks and a spooky fungal biome where rails for grinding can be summoned with spores. Not every area feels as fleshed out, but those that have that extra novelty to them kept a smile on my face.

As wonderful as moving through the world is, though, what you're tasked with doing is much duller. Each area follows the exact same structure: Find and destroy a few obstacles in each area to summon the boss, then attack the bosses' telegraphed weak points so you can hit it in the eye, and then do that two more times. Then it's onto the next area to do it all over again.

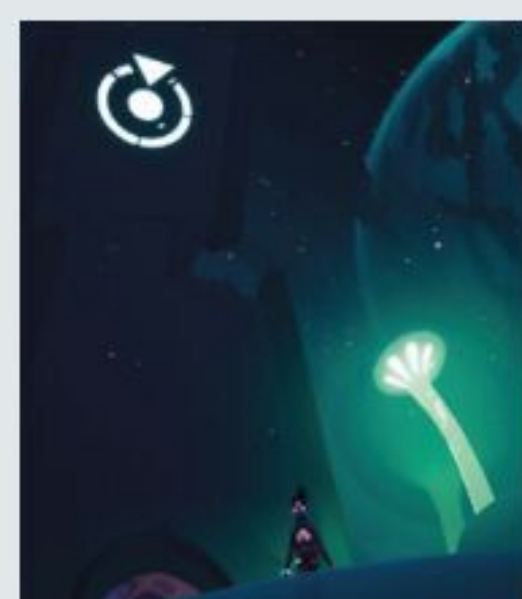
Disasterpeace returns to score but seems to be given far less room to move than the player, chained to boss fights and broad ambient soundscapes. There are practically none of the curious little scenes that filled *Hyper Light Drifter*, and allowed the music to fill the gaps in the story with moody anguish and grief. In *Solar Ash* the music is a pleasant accompaniment and definitely establishes a strong atmosphere, yet is robbed, much like the visuals, of a chance to evoke anything of weight.

NON-ICO FRIENDLY

Coming from *Hyper Light Drifter* I expected a setting equally absorbing. Instead *Solar Ash*'s story is like navigating its world sometimes; bumping into dead ends. My biggest problem with the game stems from the addition of voice acting. Right from the beginning there's a message on-screen to convey the premise, which felt clumsy, but I was willing to roll with it on the assumption this was just a little kick to get us started. However, right from the moment it begins the characters won't stop talking and explaining. Every new vista or item found has Rei deliver an explanation before you can even ask the question. As soon as a city enters my view, Rei has already identified the architecture and spoken about its

SECRET OUTFITS

How to unlock new costumes



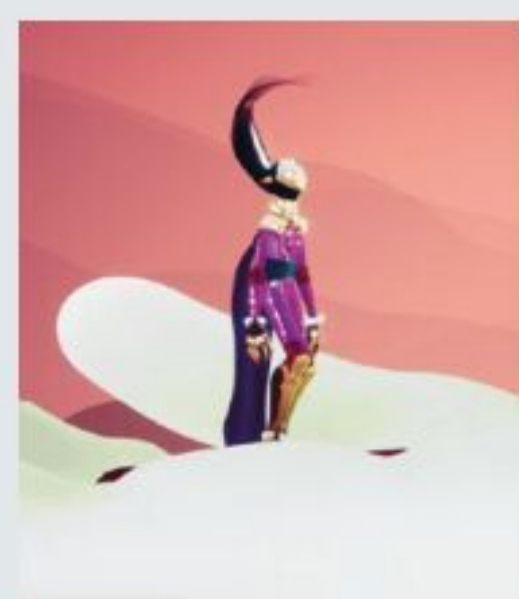
1 To unlock new gear for Rei you'll need to be on the lookout for this symbol, which will glow when near, hinting at a secret.



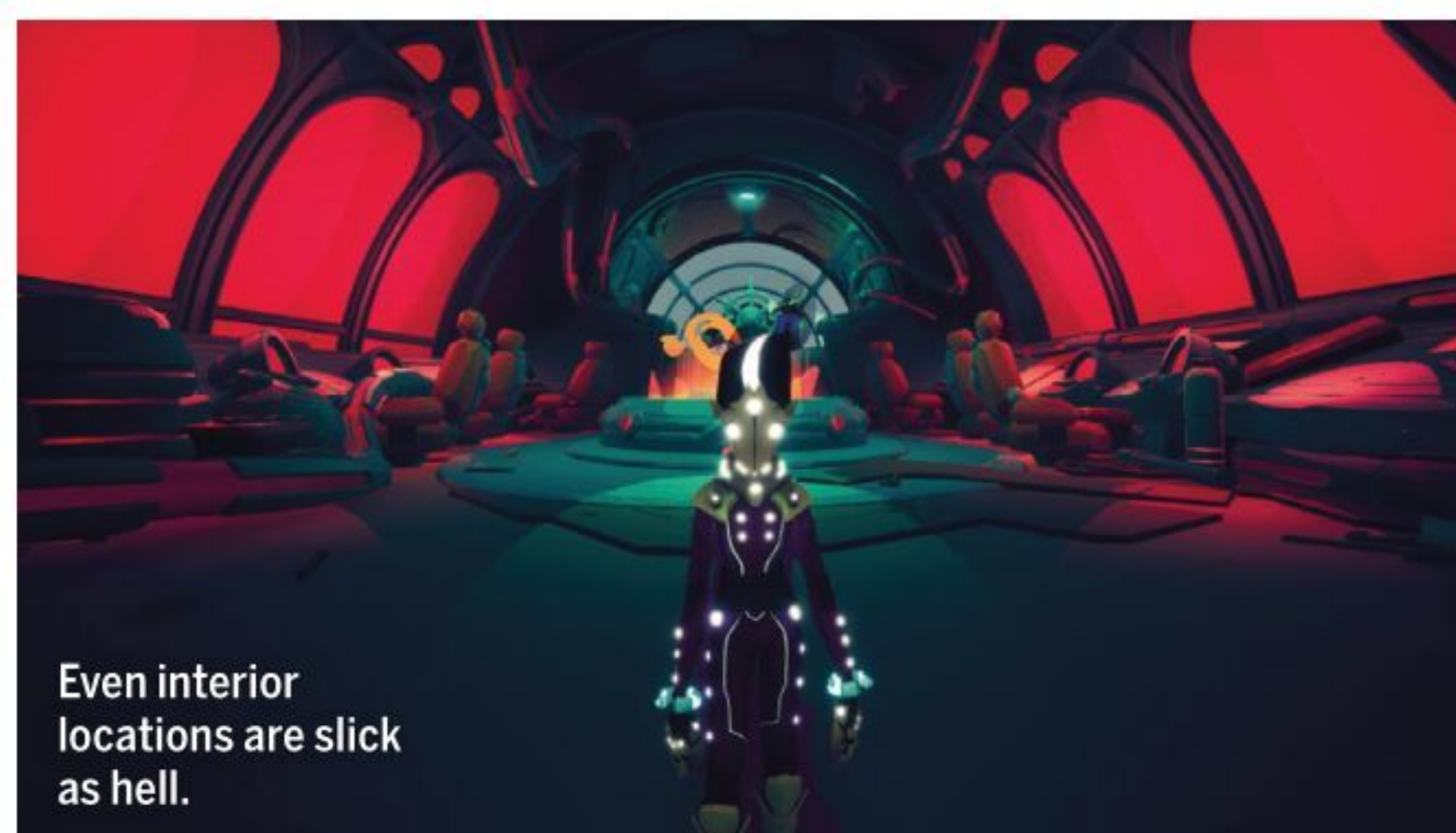
2 They're easy to miss, and each area will have six for each piece of an outfit. Trails of plasma will guide you to these hideouts.



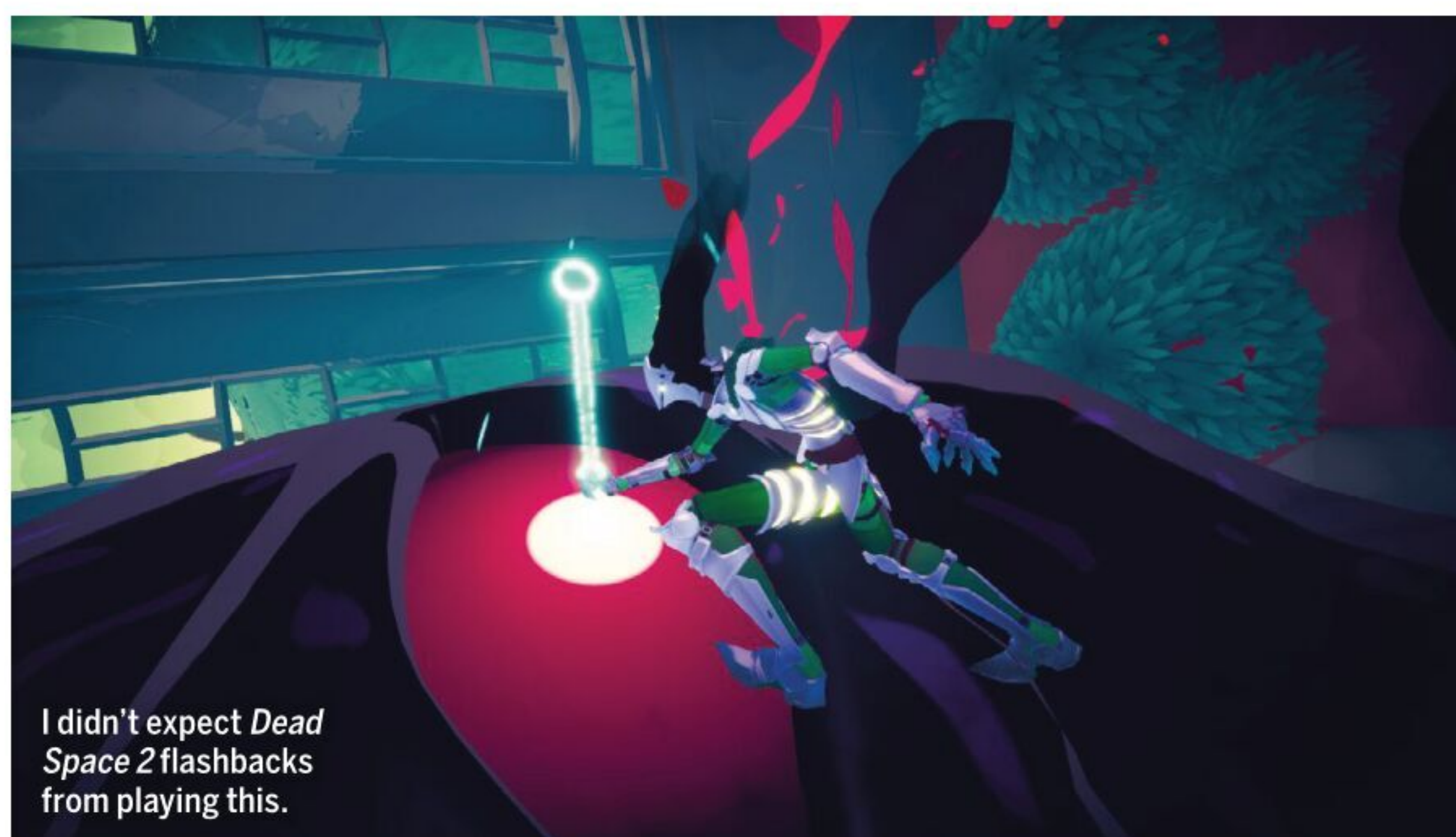
3 You're looking for these boxes, which will sometimes be guarded. You'll need to clear enemies before you'll be able to open it.



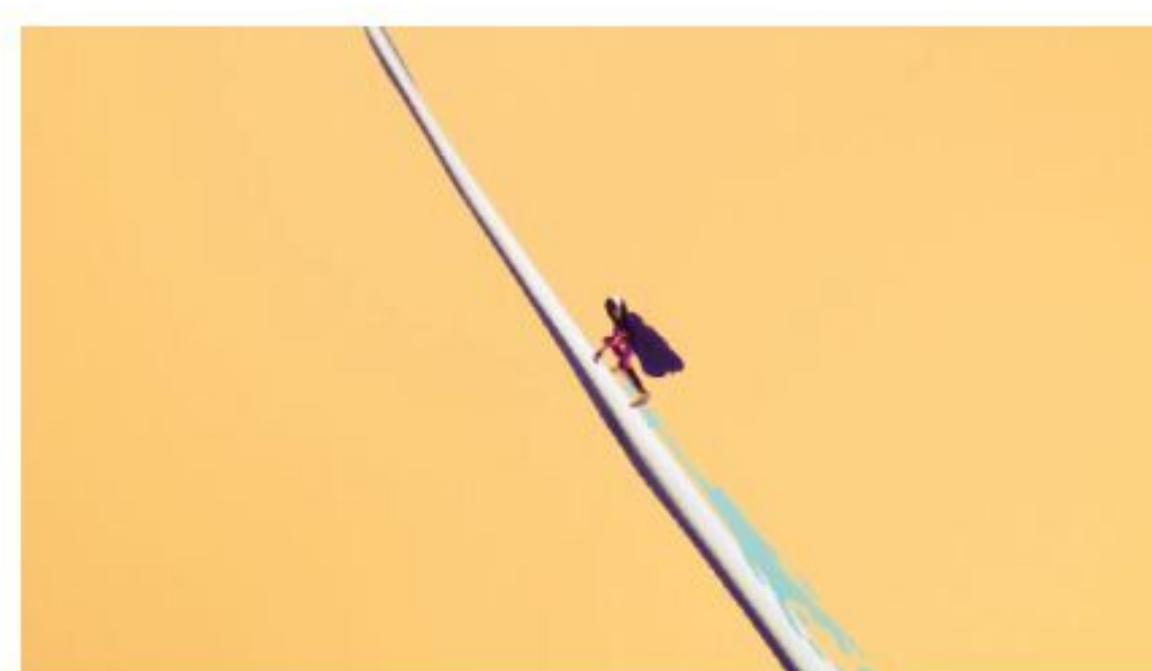
4 After you gather all six you'll get a new outfit, each with unique enhancements for you to try out as you skate around.



Even interior locations are slick as hell.

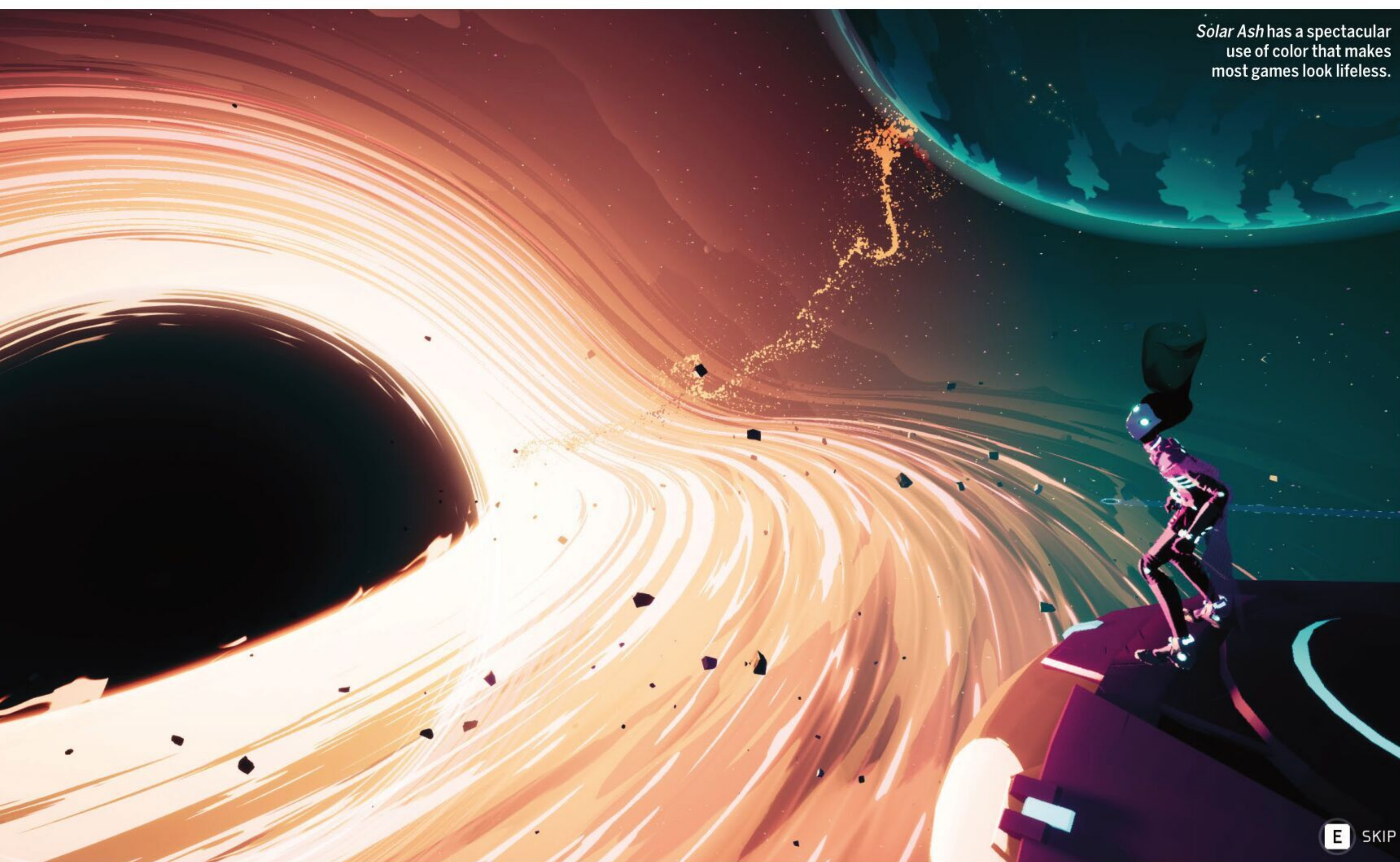


I didn't expect *Dead Space 2* flashbacks from playing this.



LEFT: The floor really IS lava.

LOWER LEFT: And I thought my commute was bad.



Solar Ash has a spectacular use of color that makes most games look lifeless.

E SKIP

Solar Ash



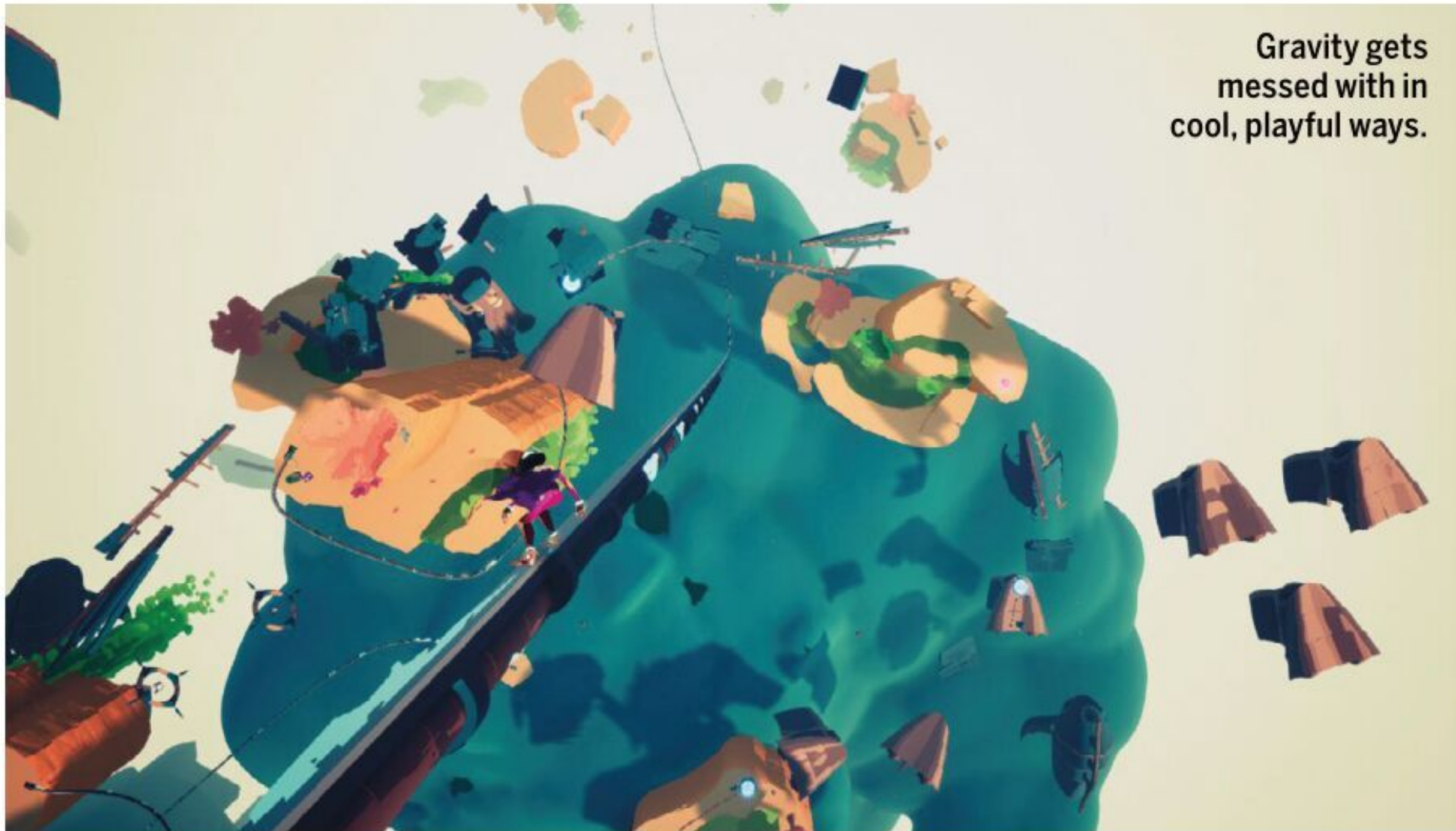
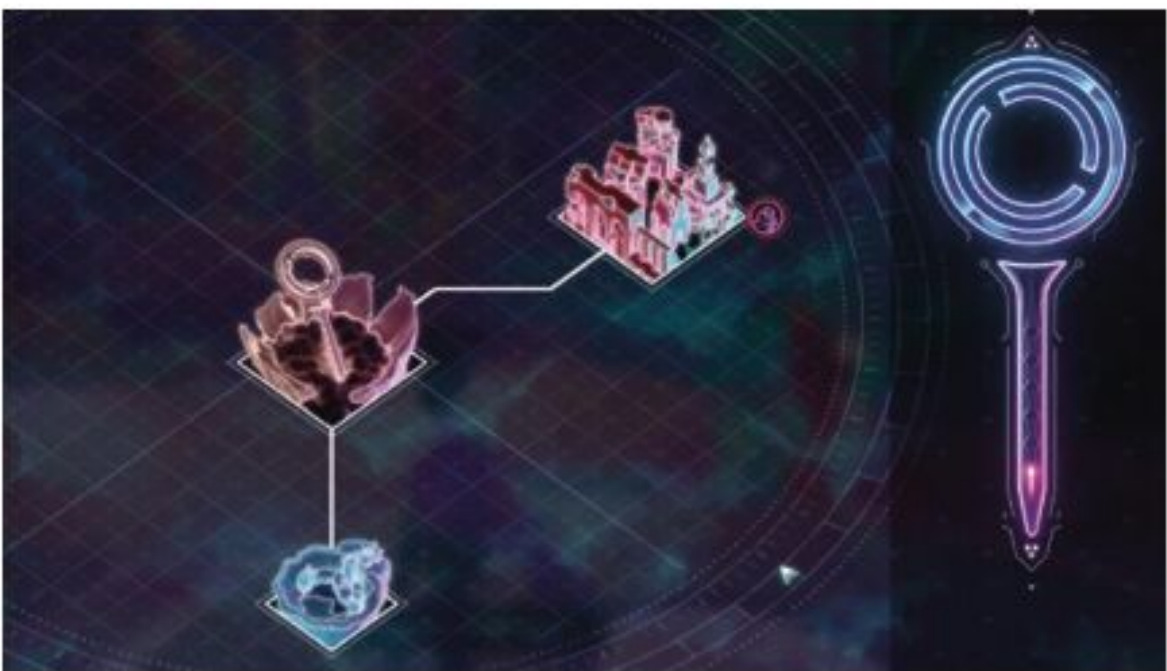
In motion, the game can be a brilliant fireworks display.



RIGHT: There are welcome changes of scenery around the halfway point.



LOWER RIGHT: The map screen is pretty but useless in helping you navigate.



Gravity gets messed with in cool, playful ways.



If they didn't talk, scenes like this would be rad.

creators. It deprives the game of the blank spaces necessary to get me speculating. *Hyper Light Drifter* excelled at this. Even now, I couldn't strictly tell you what the exact plot of that game was. I can tell you what I felt and imagined as I explored, how poignant the melancholy was in a protagonist struggling to fight for their world in the face of a fatal illness. *Solar Ash* has none of that. It has characters chatting, its world is littered with lengthy audio logs, and the story is so straightforward I imagine most will see its singular twist coming from the start, making the eventual reveal feel a little tiresome. I do smile at Rei's little chuckles on pulling off a successful trick, though—there are definitely some gains from the inclusion of voice acting.

Dialogue doesn't have to be antithetical to evocative storytelling. It's possible to enhance a world's mysteries with the right words, having characters imply meaning or depths that we ourselves might not glean from visuals alone. The dialogue of *Solar Ash* just isn't very good. It's all expository or functional, with the character archetypes so broad they're left paper thin.

Visually it's so rich and its imagery sometimes truly striking, that it feels a waste to slap explanations on it all. The giant figure who tries to crush Rei throughout could be mysterious. A malevolent entity or uncaring god? Instead, thanks to the dialogue we know exactly who they are and what they want. Several encounters that circle the same threadbare plot assure us of that. Our plucky heroine is so by the numbers too. There's a small complication that enters the mix due to the aforementioned twist, but it only does a little to elevate Rei as a character. Why doesn't she tell us about home? Give us an impression of what she's fighting for?

HACK N SKATER

Speaking of fighting, combat is certainly an oddity in this game. Movement replaces combat as the centerpiece of the game compared with *Hyper Light Drifter*, but it clings on all the same, even retaining familiar sound effects and a satisfying slash of the sword. It's far more basic though. Despite the simplicity, it's

terribly unforgiving in the early portion of the game. One or two hits will see you sent back to a checkpoint, and with the slippery movement, it's hard to avoid incoming attacks. Things don't so much become easier as the game flops between lengthy segments that are a total breeze and others that are a borderline nightmare. That doesn't

stop it being satisfying when it works. Sliding through a room, striking enemies as you zip passed, refusing to slow, is really cool, and the game does reward you when you can rise to its expectations.

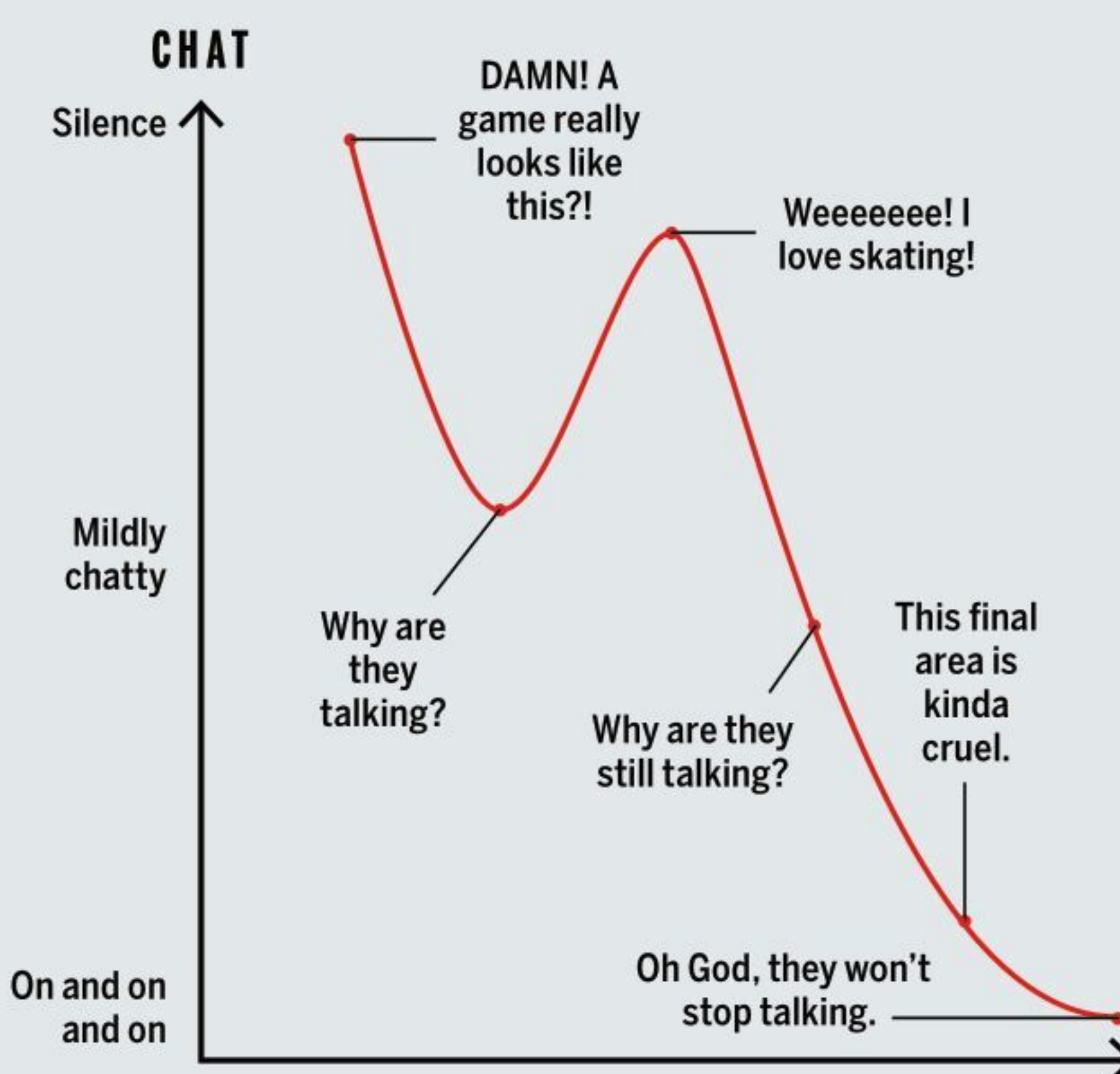
When it comes to its skating, *Solar Ash* manages to stay exhilarating enough to make it worth the price of admission on its own.

It reminded me of *The Pathless*, which feels like a close brethren. Both strong in art style while pursuing a profound sense of motion. *Solar Ash* falls behind by failing to find harmony between its means of navigation, with anything but skating feeling like a halt whereas in *The Pathless* flight, sprinting, and sliding all chain together until it's possible to bound across the map for miles, possibly in its entirety. Both games have a repetitive structure, yet *Solar Ash*'s feels far more pronounced, thanks to samey bosses and simpler, less varied puzzles. *The Pathless*

Dialogue doesn't have to be antithetical to evocative storytelling

ON RAILS SECTION

A timeline of *Solar Ash*'s highs and lows



wisely saved combat solely for its boss fights, a lesson *Solar Ash* should've learned from some of its other influences.

BOSS GRIND

Its bosses are a bit of a let down. For sheer spectacle, they're impressive. Truly massive giants that become entire islands unto themselves. Avoiding their attempts to squish you by weaving in and out of scenery is one of the game's finest moments. Once you get on their body though, they're indistinguishable from the obstacles you had to overcome to reach them, racing down their backs to hit various weak points until you're permitted to stab them in the eye. Having to do it three times, every time, feels like a wild over-estimation of how much these fights have to offer. That they so blatantly evoke *Shadow of the Colossus* only hurts it further, illuminating the absence of a real struggle with little to no back and forth between you and your foes. Team Ico's classic nailed down the David and Goliath feel—by making you feel tiny and helpless, sure, but also by permitting failure. You could fall over, take a tumble, and still climb back up. A single misstep in *Solar Ash* gets you punted to the nearest save point so you can start the sequence over again. By turning bosses into these obstacle courses, they're reduced to artifice. I never felt like I was in a deadly duel with a gargantuan foe. I felt like I was having a go on a novelty skate park, animatronic limbs flailing around while sound effects complemented my sick tricks. Which is still pretty enjoyable in its own right thanks to how well the game nails the feel of skating.

That's the thing, it's never bad. In fact, it's a fun time all in all! The skating is sublime. I just never, ever shook the feeling that something weightier or substantial was missing. *Hyper Light Drifter* haunts me like a broken memory, leaving me to try and piece it back together even years later. This is a half remembered dream already. A pleasant dream, but fast fading. My kingdom for the game *Solar Ash* could have been. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Despite its numerous strengths, *Solar Ash* unfortunately fails to skate free from its influence's gravity.

70

REAPING AND SOWING

FARMING SIMULATOR 22 retains both the franchise's magic and jank

By Luke Winkie

There are those who twist the lands of *Farming Simulator 22* into an arcadian paradise, producing endless pallets of foodstuffs every season like a terrifying Monsanto baron. I do not belong to that camp. At best, I am a filthy casual. My plough inherited from the bronze age, my cultivation skills cannot nurture anything more fragile than the hardiest of cereals, and I frequently sell my labor to the richer neighboring homesteads. And yet, here in this yeoman muck, *Farming Simulator* has finally clicked in my brain. There is so much joy in scraping by.

Farming Simulator 22 is somehow the 11th entry in this franchise. All of the games are developed by the Swiss studio Giants Software, which lovingly renders a punctilious, businesslike interpretation of heartland warmth. Upon beginning a campaign on the easiest settings, you will be gifted a barn, a house, a handful of equipment and a trio of pastures. From there, it's up to you to determine what kind of farm you'd like to build. Every day, your farmer wakes up at the crack of dawn and immediately gets to work on a laundry list of chores. The canola plot needs weeding, the wheat needs to be harvested, and a fresh payload of cotton seeds ought to be put into the ground. Like all simulation games, the player is instructed to find euphoria in the heuristics of a life that doesn't belong to you. If you do not possess some sort of envy for rural glamor, this game will likely leave you cold.

The biggest addition in *Farming Simulator 22* is a brand-new seasonal system. Leaves fall in the fall, snow blankets in the winter, and farmers must make sure they are only putting new crops in the ground when conditions are right. (Barley must be planted in the fall, and it won't be ready for a harvest until the next summer.) This also affects the economy, as some products sell at higher prices during certain parts of the year.

The biggest addition is a brand-new seasonal system

Giants Software has also added the ability to clear out the forests from the land or dig up the stones in your fields, which adds a faintly *Animal Crossing*-esque verve to the proceedings. I am far too much of a *Farming Simulator* novice to contextualize how those wrinkles deviate from the prior games in the canon,

but from a purely aesthetic perspective, I do appreciate how an idyllic little homestead can glow through the cold air.

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
The latest entry in the popular and aptly named farming sim series

EXPECT TO PAY
\$50

DEVELOPER
Giants Software

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Windows 10, GeForce GTX 1070, Intel Core i7-9700 CPU, 16GB RAM

MULTIPLAYER
Yes

LINK
farming-simulator.com

BIG FARMER

Of course, that gets to the greatest lingering complaint I have with *Farming Simulator 22*. From a pure gameplay perspective, there remains a thick layer of unpolished chaff clinging to the fundamentals. Attaching your tractor to a towable piece of equipment is finicky. I often found myself backing into my fertilizer sprayer at every possible angle before I was prompted with the hitch function. The physics logic occasionally freaks out. I'd be driving my truck down a peaceful highway, wind in my hair, before suddenly tumbling into the forest. *Farming Simulator 22* simply still lacks a certain intuitiveness that could considerably broaden the appeal of the franchise. If just a few of these creases could be smoothed over, *Farming Simulator 22* would become much easier to recommend.

That said, oftentimes I get the sense that the *Farming Simulator* community enjoys the jank. The franchise went viral for its uncanny, antiseptic style and dogmatic approach to its source material—which I suppose are the tenets you'd expect for an offbeat videogame about planting vegetables. I sorta get it. I remember hauling a payload of grain to the mill and passing by a handful of nondescript NPCs on the sidewalk, all of whom looked like they were plucked out of some open source asset depository from 2007, which did bring a smile to my face. Amid the aureate military shooters and indomitable open world adventures, *Farming Simulator 22* does occupy its own lane out of time. I was susceptible to its curious magic, I just wish others could more easily fall under the spell. ■

FALL IN LOVE WITH FARMING SIM

Become a virtual homesteading fanatic



PC GAMER VERDICT

There still isn't any game on the market quite like *Farming Simulator*, but the series is overdue for a gameplay makeover.

75

Farming Simulator 22



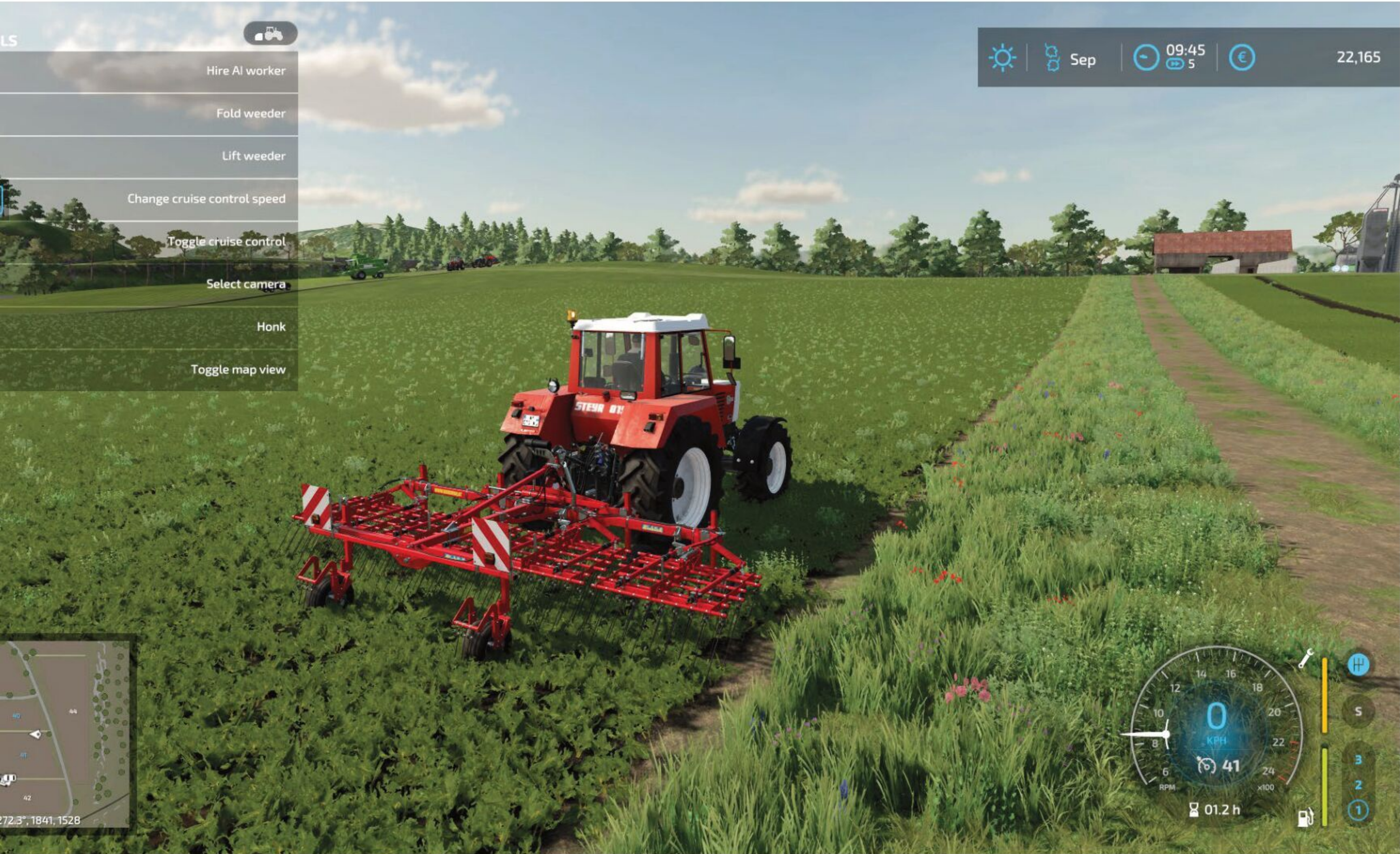
Checking in on my beloved cows.



LEFT: Now that's a well-stocked garage.



BELOW: Weeding the pastures.



THE FINAL DAZE

FINAL FANTASY XIV: ENDWALKER goes big *and* brings it home

By Oscar Taylor-Kent

The word 'expansion' feels almost too small for what *Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker* is. Not only is it essentially a full length JRPG, 50 hour JRPG in its own right, but it's also the culmination of a storyline that's been ongoing for over ten years, which myself and millions of other players have been following through regular updates that whole time. Rather than simply an add-on, it feels more like the final book in a long-running fantasy series.

So, to get to the big questions—yes, *Endwalker* is a fantastic send-off to the Hydaelyn/Zodiark saga (two ancient beings locked in a light versus dark conflict involving many crystals—*Final Fantasy* fans know the drill) that celebrates all that came before; and yes, it leaves the door wide open for new adventures that we know are on the way.

Though, in tying things off with a bow, things get a little messy. While its runtime is about the same as its previous hefty expansions, it feels like there's loads more story than usual, for good and ill. As your hero and the Scions Of The Seventh Dawn battle to overcome the apocalyptic 'Final Days', they deal with multiple climatic-feeling threats and dispatch a heap of villains, all while moving quickly between areas great distances apart (you go to the moon, after all).

It feels like the plot could have been dished out over two expansions.

What's here might be meaty, but it's not always mighty. Moments that take place in the ruins of a suddenly

tumultuous Garlemald—the Empire that's hounded our Eorzean friends for some time—are memorable, but slight. The same goes for the vibrant, colorful Thavnair, the South Asian inspired land

that we're only visiting for the first time here. From jungles with deadly wildlife to ancient ruins, there's only a handful of characters with speaking parts, but they're well-drawn enough that I wanted to learn more. They're just not allowed enough time to shine in this ambitious undertaking. It less end-walks, and more end-sprints to its conclusion.

Rather than having an anthology feel, it ends up giving it larger issues,

It feels like the plot could have been dished out over two expansions

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?

The MMO's latest expansion, closing out a long-running story arc

EXPECT TO PAY

\$40 (expansion), \$50 (complete edition)

DEVELOPER

Square Enix

PUBLISHER

In-house

REVIEWED ON

AMD Ryzen 7 1700X, Gigabyte RTX 2080 Super, 32Gb RAM

MULTIPLAYER

Yes

LINK

bit.ly/3LzK7a

like a lack of any real clear villainous endgame, and narrative conceits that suddenly present themselves then lead onto a roller-coaster path to wrapping themselves up. It's a shame as the little moments are great. Those who have played since the beginning will be fist pumping as even minor characters get time to shine—even if it feels like it has three separate 'and my axe' moments where allies show up with a wink and a nod.

Where the last expansion, *Shadowbringers*, had lots to enjoy as a self-contained story in a new world, *Endwalker*'s commitment to giving everything its time under the faltering star is both its biggest triumph and at times its weakness. Though, more often than not, anyone who's made it this far will have a big grin on their faces. Just, maybe give pause if you were planning to buy a story skip to get right here. Play through the rest first.

CAREER PROSPECTS

Peel back the emotional and at times very bleak story (apocalypses tend to be a little dicey, after all), and the content in *Endwalker* provides what's expected. You have two new jobs in the Reaper, a physical DPS, and Sage, a healer (and the first new one in a few years). You have six new story dungeons, plus two extra endgame ones, and three trials (large-scale boss battles). You've got six new maps to stomp around as you complete quests, join up with players to take on FATEs (Full Active Time Event, like Destiny's Public Events), or get woody with your axe as you take on trees for crafting materials. Plus, two new cities for up-to-date players to hang out in—Thavnair's Radz-At-Han, and the Greek-inspired Old Sharlayan (full of stuffy scholars).

All of these additions represent *Final Fantasy XIV*'s development team at their peak. Both jobs are terrific fun, and thanks to the way the MMO allows all users to switch jobs straight from their inventory, easy for

CRYSTAL MAZE

Guiding you through the expansions of the past



FINAL FANTASY XIV: A REALM REBORN 2013

This brave hard relaunch saved the panned original release by completely overhauling basically everything while making the reshaping canon.



FINAL FANTASY XIV: HEAVENSWARD 2015

Isolated in a strange land, you end up caught in a conflict of church and state. Except replace 'state' with 'dragons'. This is where things really ramped up.



FINAL FANTASY XIV: STORMBLOOD 2017

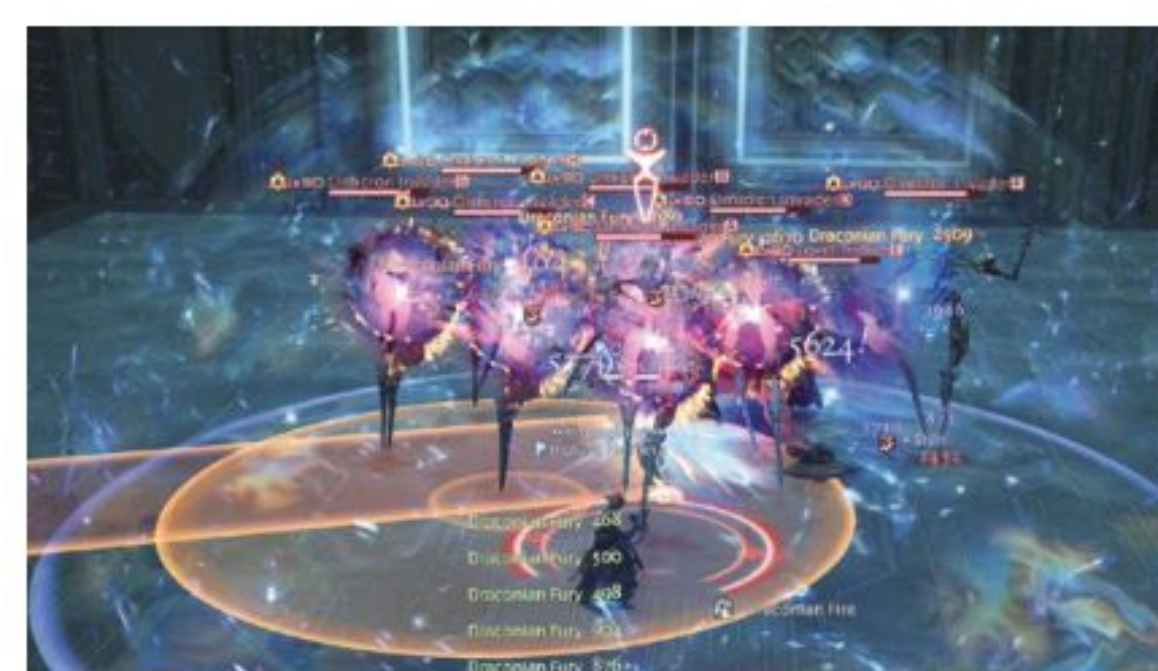
Bloody war rages as the fight between Garlemald and Eorzea comes to a head. Travel to the east to unite, liberate, and fight a chap with luscious hair.



FINAL FANTASY XIV: SHADOWBRINGERS 2019

Journey to a parallel world where eternal daylight reigns, infecting a dwindling population with light that results in an angelic body horror transformation.

Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker



ABOVE: New gear looks the part. *Endwalker* has some of the best armor yet.



FAR LEFT: Discovering life on the moon... and then ending it.



Taking out a boss always feel satisfying thanks to clever mechanics.

Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker



ABOVE: Healers don't just heal in this MMO. Sages can lay down some pain with a laser barrage.



FAR RIGHT: Watch where the crystals are to get out of the way of the attack in time.



Photo bomb! For as fun as *FFXIV* manages to be solo, it's always better when messing around with pals.



Final Fantasy XIV: Endwalker

» anyone to jump into. Reaper is all about twirling a scythe around as you fill up a couple of meters in order to power-up your own personification of Death. Sage, meanwhile, uses robo-scalpels to not only heal, but erect barriers and blast lasers at monsters, all while juggling a little mech toggle that alters the mode of some of your abilities to, for instance, turn a single-hit blast into one that damages over time instead. It feels very active. As usual, though, these start out at a level a bit below the main quest (70 versus 80 this time around), meaning you'll need to put in some grind time if you want to take them on your journey—though earning XP is so generous it won't take very long.

Debatably there's a third new job in Summoner, which has received an overhaul like no other. The cute little minions are out, and bigger pals are in—as you can now call directly on the power of Primals, which flashily take up large chunks of screen space as they go on a rampage.

Tweaks have come for all jobs, but it's more than just adding new stuff. Old skills have been pruned to make way for the new, and as usual it's all smartly done in a way that avoids things becoming overwhelming. My main job, Dragoon, has dropped an upkeep move in favor of automating it, while adding a new area-of-effect finisher that makes it integrate more closely with the rest of the moveset. A neutral change to my standard hotbar in terms of space, which feels deliberate. It's especially useful when playing with a controller, which continues to be fantastically supported with the crossbar system that allows easy access to three or four bars all at the touch of triggers.

Similarly, crafting and gathering have been hit big. Always a fun and deeper-than-expected diversion, the disciplines could often feel bloated. With high-quality materials blasted out of the game entirely to reduce the need to take up multiple inventory slots, everything now feels rather more streamlined. Past content like quests and skills have all been carefully altered to account for its absence too. It's a huge undertaking that feels like it's paid off as those good with their hands prepare to juggle the brand-new gear *Endwalker* has introduced.

BOSS BABIES

The same philosophy can be seen in the dungeons and trials you'll either be partying-up for or undertaking with AI allies. MMO mechanics have never been more readable, and boss battles, whether within dungeons themselves or the larger bust-ups, feel thrilling as a result. Each has some great mechanics that make the

bouts feel unique, while also remaining fair. Whether it's a snowy behemoth who hides in a blizzard before popping out to strike most of the arena, who you can track by the snowy footprints it leaves

behind, or juggling where to stand to avoid both a string of deadly butterflies and a wing-blast all at once, it feels fun to pull off your moves while dancing around their attacks. The telegraphing of some classic mechanics has even been extended, with 'tankbusters' now receiving a special red arrow to denote that your party's buff buddy beating is on its way.

Trusts also feel better than ever. This recent addition means that rather than queueing up to take on story content with friends, you can take NPCs with you to do it solo. They're competent too, so there's no excuses if you end up wiping—and it can be a great tool to learn boss mechanics. By their presence, they even add to the story as they banter back and forth. I usually always go through with players for the first time, but one instance here struck me so much with how the cast of

Allies will now sometimes join you as you walk around

FRIEND OR FOE

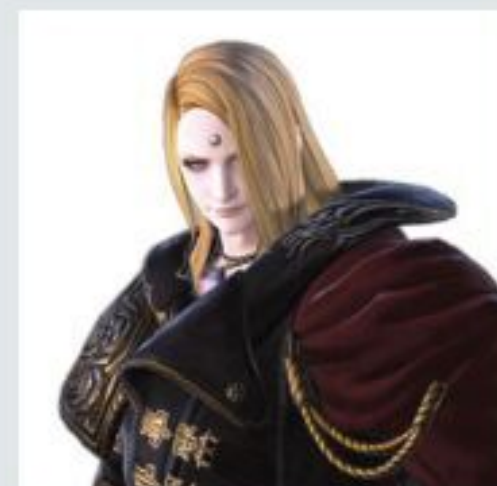
Some of the faces that'll join you...

**KRILE MAYER BALDESION**

This learned lalafell really comes into her own here, using her academic connections to help the Scions set up base in Old Sharlayan.

**ALPHINAUD & ALISAIE LEVEILLEUR**

Taking them to their homeland and thorny father, the twins will need to reckon with their past to realize how far they've come.

**ZENOS YAE GALVUS**

The once-emperor of Garlemand has shrugged off death and taken up the scythe himself to pursue his only desire—a rematch with you.

characters approached their mission that I simply had to stick it out with them to see how it would play out. I was not disappointed.

PARTY PEOPLE

Singleplayer duties also return, giving you setpiece moments to play through all by yourself, sometimes as your own character and other times allowing you to step into the shoes of an ally (and now offering easier difficulties if you fail once). These feel less spectacular than they did in *Shadowbringers*, but offer some surprisingly effective changes of pace and unique ways of storytelling while allowing you to stay in control of the action. Thancred's stealth mission is no *Metal Gear Solid*, but better than it has any right to be, and another forces you to play as a much weaker character than usual, which really makes you consider which fights to take on, and which to avoid.

Some of this inventiveness carries through into main quests, with more emphasis placed on keeping you present in the moment rather than always arbitrarily bouncing between quest markers. Allies will now sometimes join you as you walk around, often having places where you can stop off for optional chats (not dissimilar to, though much more limited than, *Tales Of's* skit system). Less successful are tailing missions which, while thankfully few and far between, are as annoying as any tailing system ever.

It's impressive that the team still manage to take *Final Fantasy XIV's* trappings and crystallize them into new forms even so many years on, from the way jobs and dungeons feel better than ever, to the confidence with which they're able to play with the intersection between gameplay and storytelling. But, those trappings are still there. Sure, there are some stunning vistas and lighting effects, and the new armor designs are enchanting, but the age of the core game can't help but show, smooth as it is to play. This is a great final chapter to a story that'll stick with us, and we're excited to see the team tell a new one—but it might be time for some changes to shake Eorzea up. ■

PC GAMER**VERDICT**

A slightly flawed narrative victory lap combines with elegant mechanical tweaks that will please fans.

89

BRUTAL BALLET

Think with your fists in **FIGHTS IN TIGHT SPACES**

By Dashiell Wood

Smashing a goon's head against the wall before launching his buddy out of a window doesn't sound strategic on paper, but the turn-based combat of *Fights in Tight Spaces* transforms even the simplest enemy encounter into an intricate puzzle where the only solution is your fists. Although its roguelike trappings can detract from the overall experience, these moments where everything comes together in a glorious display of violence always shine through.

Stepping into the well-polished shoes of an international super spy tasked with dismantling criminal syndicates, the basic plot does little more than loosely string together the five separate worlds in which the action occurs. Divided into semi-procedurally generated levels, each world has you fighting through a number of tightly enclosed locations that range from densely packed subway carriages to compact office corridors. The Hollywood influences are clear and it's thrilling to recreate iconic film moments like *Casino Royale*'s opening bathroom brawl.

Despite being rendered in the same charming minimalist style, each world still manages to convey a unique aesthetic to set themselves

apart, a fact greatly helped by the huge variety in enemy design and combat ability. While early introductions are limited to basic buffs, like slightly higher health pools, you're soon dealing with enemies armed with guns or the ability to

counterattack outside of their turns. It's good that things start off slow, as the combat is deceptively deep and can take a few hours to master. Fights are centered around improvisation, and each turn has you

Each turn has you juggling finite energy resources with a hand of cards

juggling finite energy resources with a hand of cards representing various attacks, dodges, blocks, and moves. Each card carries a specific energy cost and there's lots of strategy in spending your energy efficiently with your available hand. Incoming enemy

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
A turn-based roguelike focused on intense melee combat

EXPECT TO PAY
\$25

DEVELOPER
Ground Shatter

PUBLISHER
Mode 7

REVIEWED ON
Nvidia GTX 970, Intel i5-4460, 32GB Ram

MULTIPLAYER
No

LINK
fightsintightspace.com

actions are highlighted to assist your decision making, and you frequently have to choose between either evading a possible attack or landing an extra hit on your adversary. Knowing what's coming next not only lends confrontations an exhilarating cat-and-mouse feel, but also makes it possible to exploit an enemy's future moves to your benefit. It's hugely satisfying using your grapples and attacks to shuffle a group of thugs around so that they end up in the perfect position to all accidentally attack each other.

DECK 'EM

At the end of each turn, a new hand of six cards is drawn at random from the deck, and once every card has been played the deck is reshuffled to start the whole process again. This core loop seems simple at first, but the addition of Combo, a numeric value that rises with every attack and falls with blocking or movement, adds an extra layer of depth to overcome. Combo can be spent on powerful special moves, a system much like the combos found in other fighting games. There are cards which represent several injuries as



TOP: Money can be used to pick up new cards in between levels.





ABOVE: Some moves require environmental objects to perform.

well, which can appear in your deck and slowly decrease your health if you take too many hits, making a frequent use of dodges and blocks vital for survival. The result is a combat system that is simple enough to be enjoyed from the get-go, but also containing more than enough depth to sustain interest across multiple playthroughs.

Whilst the emphasis on repeating runs works well, the same can't be said of some of the game's other roguelike elements. In particular, the bonus objectives that can be completed to earn currency become far too difficult as the game progresses. Completing increasingly tricky levels with very few turns can seem outright impossible, and my successes were often the result of luck rather than skill. Frustratingly, money is used for everything from upgrading cards on the fly to topping up health in between fights, making it essential for victory on higher difficulties. It's by no means a deal breaker, but this slightly haphazard implementation of the in-game economy feels at odds with the exceptionally polished combat and wonderfully clean visuals. ■



Every move is suitably cinematic.



A FIGHT TO REMEMBER

Other strategy games with memorable fighting mechanics



SUPERHOT

Far from slow paced, this FPS where time only moves when you do is both strategic and cinematic.



HITMAN GO

Turning the series' sprawling sandboxes into puzzles, this has you using stealth and taking out guards.



JOHN WICK HEX

Slowing the movie's action set pieces to a crawl, *Hex* challenges you to think like an assassin.



XCOM: CHIMERA SQUAD

This colorful *XCOM* spinoff's breach system was a clever twist on the formula.

PC GAMER VERDICT

Fights in Tight Spaces is an excellent turn-based strategy title that shines in spite of some very minor annoyances.

83



FRYE UP

Great eviscerations across Dickensian London in **ASSASSIN'S CREED SYNDICATE**

There are many things in life that we accept as normal in Britain despite being weird. Punch and Judy shows. Why drinking cow milk is fine, but pig milk isn't. I get the same feeling when I fire up *Assassin's Creed*, and remember the entire series is built on memory-hopping, past life sci-fi. The *Animus* is the child beauty pageant of videogame plot devices.

Happily, *Assassin's Creed Syndicate* doesn't waste much time in the future. We get some info about Abstergo, a bit of Danny Wallace in knitwear being cheerful, and then we're swiftly off to the past to kill strangers. And what a version of the past it is. It's Victorian London as glimpsed in a commemorative snowglobe, with as many glib Britishisms wedged into its impressive space as possible. Two minutes after the game properly starts—after an interminable pre-credits intro—we literally bump into Charles Dickens. There are penny farthings. Corgis in bags. Skylines ruptured by endless polluting chimneys. And then we have the game's moustachioed, tea-sipping arch-bastard, Crawford Starrick: a man whose name sounds

like an anagram of a '70s prog rock band, and who looks like Satan's masseuse. Even the Syndicate's goons are parodically British: a bunch of bowler-hatted, pock-marked guys called the Blighters. You can't help but wonder what names landed on the cutting room floor.

You're almost willing the goons to gun you down

CREED IS GOOD

This level of stereotyping might be insulting if it were any other country at any other time, but here it's a treat, like clambering around in a version of

The Muppets Christmas Carol where you can garrotte Gonzo. It's gloriously slick, almost to the point that it shocks me how easy it is to climb everything. At the same time, it's all so easy that I sometimes feel like the game would be happy to carry on playing without me. I could

NEED TO KNOW

WHAT IS IT?
Victorian London Commemorative Plate: The Game

EXPECT TO PAY
\$30

DEVELOPER
Ubisoft

PUBLISHER
In-house

REVIEWED ON
Intel Core i7-7700 CPU @ 3.60GHz, 16 GB RAM, NVIDIA GeForce GTX 1070, Windows 10

MULTIPLAYER
No
LINK
ubisoft.com/en-gb/game/assassins-creed

probably climb St Paul's Cathedral by sitting on my keyboard. It's impressive, but also makes me feel unnecessary. Combat, too, lacks a bit of connective tissue. It looks incredible—all flashy counters, kneed faces, and twirling canes—but so much of it feels like it's there because it looks cool. Being shot at is a good example. I get a nice, lengthy prompt when someone's aiming at me, and they only seem to fire when I duck. The first few times make you feel like a god. After that, you're almost willing the goons to gun you down, just to see if they can. Combined, these things can make *Syndicate* feel a bit patronizing, but perhaps that's not the point. There aren't many titles that offer so rich an intricate version of a place, and fewer still that let you explore it in such detail. It has the misery and majesty of Victorian London, and you can experience the lot by holding one button. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

Finally, a setting drizzly enough to justify those silly hoods, and good old London town no less!

75

BELOW: Is there anything more depressing than a single child's shoe?



NEED TO KNOW

EXPECT TO PAY
\$60

DEVELOPER
Compulsion Games

PUBLISHER
Gearbox Publishing

JOY DIVISION

Few things are more British than **WE HAPPY FEW**

Now here's a premise to chill the blood. A game built not just on the British predisposition towards abject misery, but the idea that it's grown so intolerable that we're forced to self-medicate.

We Happy Few crafts a great alternate reality, set in a post-war Britain where Germany won then stole all the children. It's a place painted with the counter-cultural weirdness and threatening surrealism of the likes of *The Prisoner* and *A Clockwork Orange*. But then? Then it makes me fight bees in randomly generated fields. It's almost like *We Happy Few* is willing me to have a hateful time, like some kind of clever and utterly misguided metacommentary. I search around in endless bins to find the necessary equipment to keep my blood sugar up. I fail to navigate

poorly-explained societal structures by wearing the wrong outfits. If *We Happy Few* was a simpler, less cerebral game I'd expect it to feel this punitive; but it's just clever enough that everything I do feels like a personal failure. And when fights happen, the game seems upset at me that I'm bludgeoning my assailants to death, as if the slipshod stealth and tangled systems left me any other choice. The result is like playing an anxiety attack: a waking stress dream where you're having breakfast with Gillian Anderson in a posh hotel, but your cutlery has turned into your feet. So close to being special, yet so far. And despite this, the setting and story are compelling enough that some part of me still wants to keep playing. And if that's not the most British concept imaginable, I'm not sure what is. ■

59



GRAY MATTER

Perhaps the thing I love most about *Gray Matter* is that in this world, a sign exists somewhere in England that has 'Oxford' in one direction and 'London' in the other. No distances. No other info. Just that. And this sign being rotated by bad weather is a silly premise for an otherwise nicely grown up adventure game. It's the sort of setting that feels like it should be a show from the mid-90s: Ex-goth, magician, and con artist Sam ends up accidentally working as an assistant for acclaimed but damaged neurobiologist David Styles. It's unpretentious and cosy, from the gentle puzzling, wonderful music, and elegant writing, the point-and-click equivalent of an ill-fitting old sweater on a frosty day. ■

73



VAMPYR

One thing games so often seem to struggle with is the balance of bastardry. It's always easier to be nice than nasty, with bad behavior usually netting short-term gain but missing out on long-term rewards. Right from the start, *Vampyr* offers a different choice: The more people you kill, the more directly powerful you become. The problem is you're playing a doctor, and apparently the hippocratic oath doesn't end with undeath. More excruciatingly, in order to lure people into the shadows and drink them like milkshakes, you have to get to know them first. Lumpen combat gets in the way of an otherwise distinguished bloodsucking sim, but *Vampyr* deserves credit for making me reconsider playing nice. ■

70



Looking at watches in games: Stressful.

THE OCCUPATION

The subject matter and middling scores should inform you that this month's theme was intended to be 'England'. But it ended up being 'London', so *The Occupation* is here for anyone who's ever traveled further north than Milton Keynes. It's a sharp immersive sim that has you unraveling a mystery over a fixed time. You interview people, look through bins, go places you shouldn't—*Dishonored* with pondering, not stabbing. I'm glad this game exists, even if the constraints and trespass anxiety bring me out in a damp sweat. ■

71

EXTRA+LIFE

CONTINUED ADVENTURES IN GAMING



“Out pops my head to take in the surroundings, and a wave of guilt hits”

Curiosity (almost) killed the dwarf in the excellent **DEEP ROCK GALACTIC**

Throughout my years of gaming, I've made plenty of daft decisions. I once picked a fight with Gandhi in *Civilization IV*, for instance, and decided to complete *Aliens: Colonial Marines*. Somehow though, I find myself making my most boneheaded choice yet when faced with a race back to the dropship in *Deep Rock Galactic*.

At the end of every level of this co-op shooter, you need to race from where you are to the ship that's coming to pick you up. There's a time limit on this, and a swarm of monstrosities standing between you and being rescued. It should be simple. Except, on this run, I go haring towards our ship in a straight line, while my buddy is off on the path we had already made throughout the level.

BEN TYRER



THIS MONTH
Was constantly distracted by anything that could be gold.

ALSO PLAYED
FIFA 22,
Forza Horizon 5

I'm directly underneath the ship, but 50 meters below it, so confidently tell him, “Don't worry, I'm going to dig my way up.” He sighs, and says it's maybe not the best idea, but at that point I'm halfway into rockville.

Why is this so thick? Because all I've got above me is the greenish blocks of rock that really aren't there to be mined and the fact that I have to awkwardly hop into the air to knock out my next section of path. This is not conducive to a speedy dash back. Essentially, I'm a dwarven Andy Dufresne, except I have five

TOP: Give a man two hand drills, and everything starts to look like a tunnel yet to be dug...

minutes instead of a lifetime jail sentence to get myself out.

DIGGING ON A PRAYER

Now, there's a reason for my hubris. I'm only on my third mission, having a friend teach me the cut and thrust of a game that mines (ahem) so much frantic glee from getting your team of dwarves to burrow through alien planets. Before all this, I'm starting to get a feel of things, tagging items that might be of interest, dropping resources into the 'MULE', and learning the special skills of the Scout. Instead of playing the level's objective though, I put all my focus

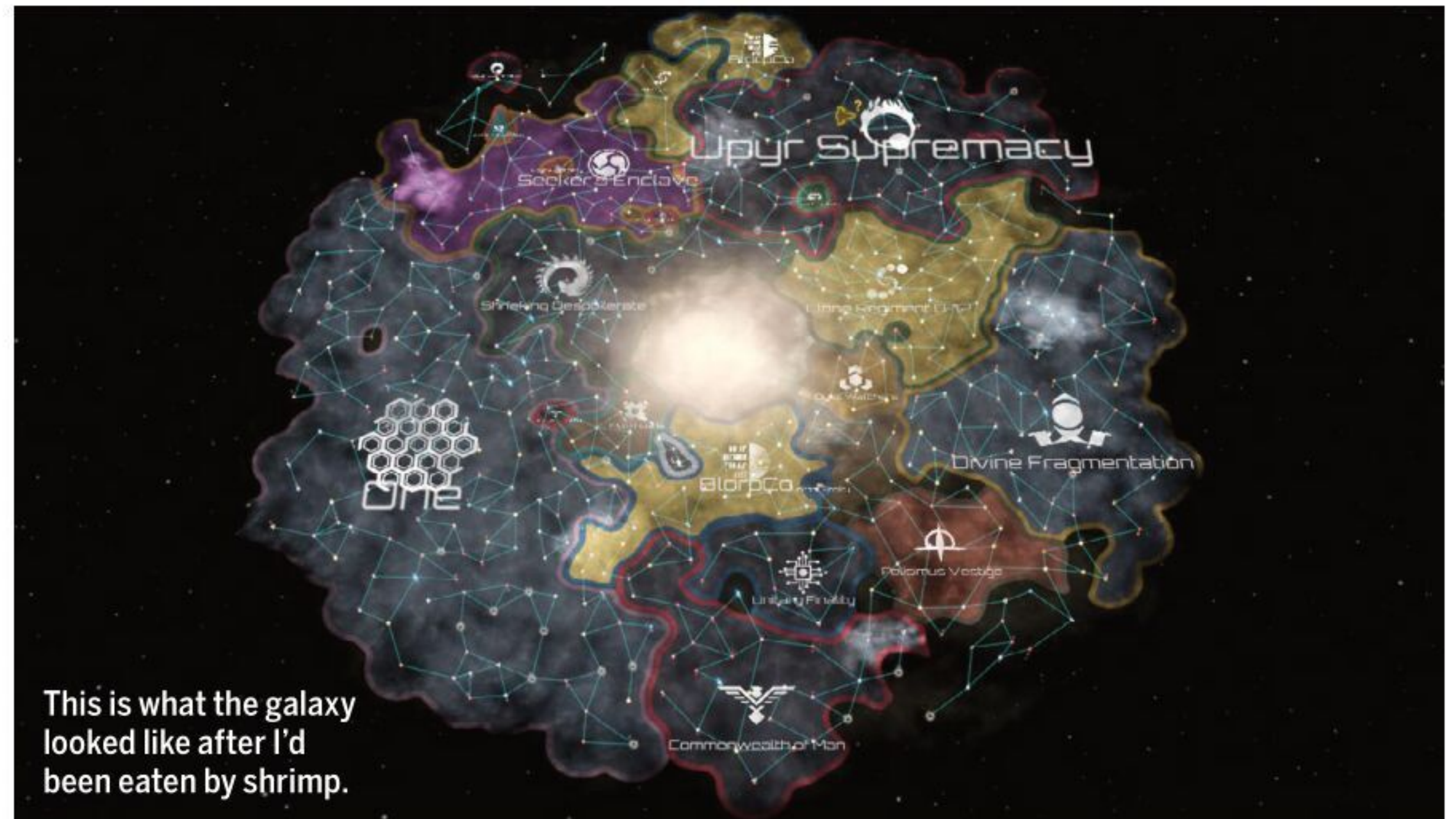
BUT WHEN IT'S THIS FUN, I PLAN ON MAKING THESE KINDS OF MISTAKES AGAIN...



into chasing after the gold you find throughout levels. Early on in our escapades, I ask my comrade, “If I see gold in the ceiling, can I mine my way through the walls up to it?” I can, he says, so I do, learning how to dig upwards. It is knowledge that almost dooms me.

Still, this is the reason why I’m always thinking about *Deep Rock Galactic*. Few shooters encourage you to make bad decisions, dangling possibilities in front of you that feel achievable. Deceptively simple quests make getting to grips with the game accessible—but every level allows its own nuances. I get a greater sense of achievement out of attempting to get off the beaten path than playing the same, similar objectives I’ve mastered in most other shooters.

All is not lost in the end. Eventually, my pickaxe creates an opening to where the ship is. Out pops my head to take in the surroundings and a wave of guilt hits me. The swarm I mentioned didn’t disperse—it’s been besieging our ship this whole time, with my mate holding them back alone. I blunder my way over, relieved he’s still alive to escape with me. Don’t tell him, but when it’s this fun, I plan on making these kinds of mistakes again... ■



This is what the galaxy looked like after I’d been eaten by shrimp.

“The sci-fi drama is delicious”

Making **STELLARIS** my own

▶ ROBIN VALENTINE



THIS MONTH
Got along surprisingly well with the space vampires.

ALSO PLAYED
Deep Rock Galactic, *Assassin’s Creed Valhalla*

The thing I love about *Stellaris*, Paradox’s grand space 4X, isn’t the strategy—it’s the stories that organically emerge from its galaxies of warring aliens. But I started finding those stories would run out of steam earlier than I wanted.

The problem was the empires I was encountering. Being randomly generated, they often don’t have clear, memorable features—you see one interstellar megacorporation, holy crusade, or scientist enclave, and you’ve seen ‘em all. In the early game, when you’re only interacting with a few at a time, it’s easy to read personality into them, but as you meet more and more they blur together, and by the mid game I’ve given up trying to keep them straight.

DO IT YOURSELF

The solution? I started making my own galaxies—or, at least, their populations. I create full sets of

custom empires and lock them for spawning, leaving no room for randomly-generated ones. Each is designed with a personality and elevator pitch concept that’s distinctive enough for even my sputtering brain to hold on to—from the irritable and irradiated vulture-people of the Shrieking Despoilerate, to the abandoned clone army Regiment O-12, to the blood-sucking slavers of the Upyr Supremacy.

I’m self-aware enough to realize that I’ve fallen way down the rabbit hole at this point, but this bit of geeky world-building has completely rejuvenated a game I’d already sunk 200 hours into. In a galaxy filled with my own heroes and villains, the sci-fi drama is delicious. When I first encounter an empire, they’re not a blank slate, they’re a defined culture, and I already have some idea whether I want them to be my friends or to take them down a peg. And when they surprise me with some unexpected move, it’s all the more delightful—like my creations have taken on a life of their own.

Well, it was delightful, until The One, a hive-mind of psychic shrimp, got too into their designated role as the galaxy’s baddies. As salty mandibles devoured every last crumb of my hard-won Empire of Earth, the irony was a little difficult to take. Perhaps I’ll have to make myself more allies for next time. ■

“I just never have any idea where I’m supposed to go next...”

All who wander are not lost in **JEDI KNIGHT II: JEDI OUTCAST**

Kyle Katarn, his beige henley, and that single brown shoulder pad have been part of my life for a long time. I first played his final video game appearance: *Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy* (technically *Star Wars: Dark Forces IV: Jedi Knight III: Jedi Outcast II: Jedi Academy*) in the third grade, and I’ve drifted to and from his adventures ever since.

The *Dark Forces/Jedi Knight* series has been foundational to PC gaming. Indeed, *Dark Forces* was the first FPS where you could look up and down. It feels like a bit of an afterthought in peoples’ minds these days though, perhaps due to being relegated to the non-canon dustbin of *Star Wars* history with the rest of the Expanded Universe. It’s a shame, because the entire series is worth a revisit.

Unfortunately, I’ve hit a bit of a snag in the third entry, *Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast* (*Star Wars: Dark Forces III: Jedi Knight II: Jedi Outcast*.) The lightsaber combat is a revelation. The encounters are designed with a precision and joy familiar to lovers of boomer shooters everywhere.

▶ TED LITCHFIELD



THIS MONTH
Drifted through reveries of the old Expanded Universe.

ALSO PLAYED
Halo Infinite, *Disco Elysium: The Final Cut*

I just never have any idea where I’m supposed to go next...

BLUE MILK RUN

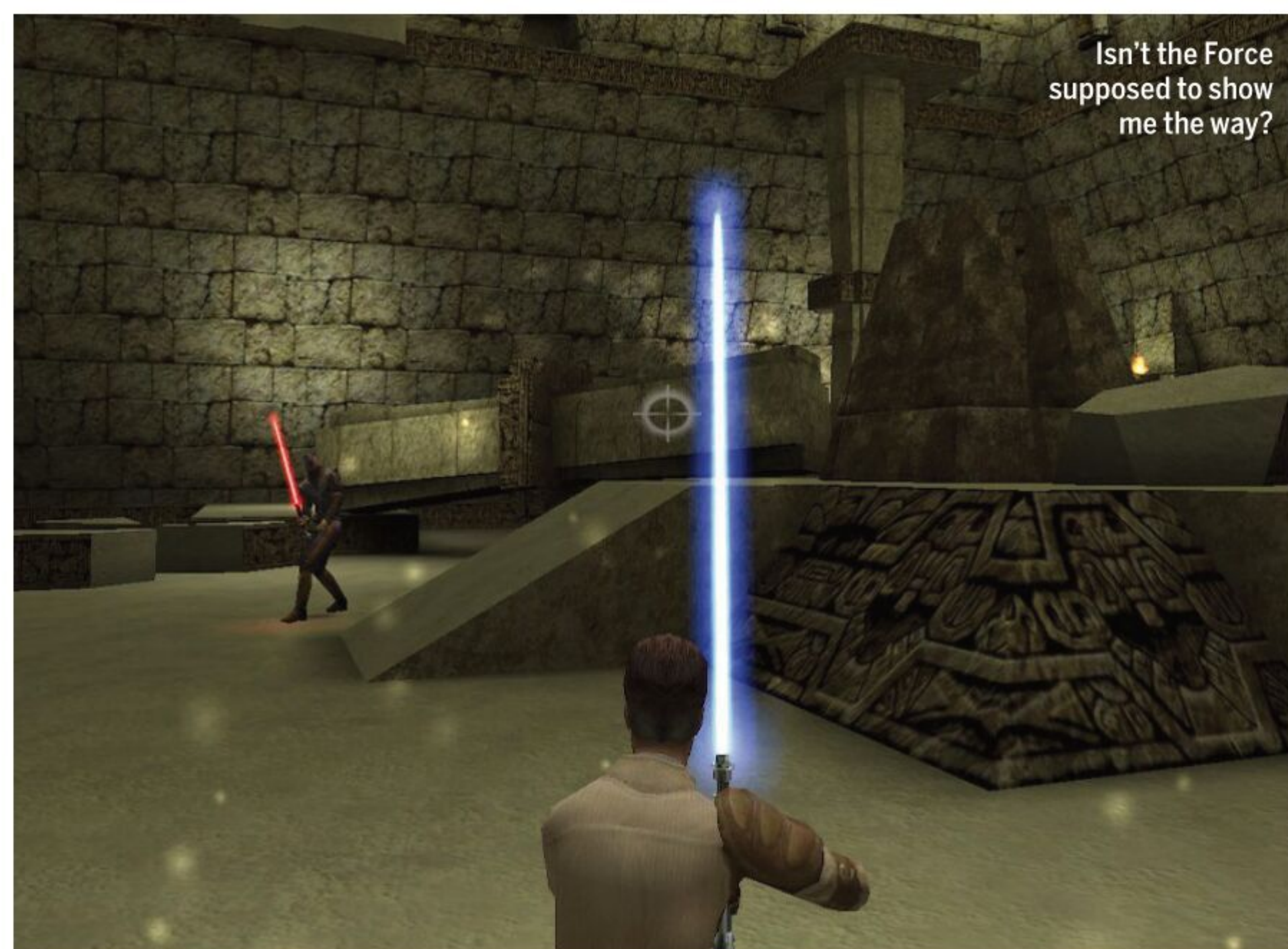
I’ve always been a bit navigationally challenged in videogames, I’ll admit. I was kept from *Morrowind* for years due to my addiction to quest markers, but I’m a grown adult now, I’ve worked on this flaw, and this game still doesn’t make any sense. A GameFAQs guide to an early level showed me how silly I was for not jumping off a platform into a drainage pipe, blowing up an electrical conduit, turning on a

conveyor belt, not riding it all the way to the end, and instead jumping off halfway through to find the critical path to the rest of the level, concealed by a muddy circa-2002 cave wall texture.

I’ve got one last cryptic path to navigate before I complete my replay. It’s level 24, I’m in the bowels of Yavin IV, and I’ve been running in circles for minutes. I took a break to find a good video Let’s Play, as the GameFAQs guide didn’t explain things clearly. I was overjoyed to find “Star Wars Jedi Knight II Jedi Outcast Chapter 24 Yavin Final Part 1,” uploaded to YouTube in July of 2011. Not because it helped me, though. From the three minute mark to the video’s conclusion at 10:33, its creator just runs in circles in the same spot I was stuck at.

This guy was unable to find the right path forward until “Star Wars Jedi Knight II Jedi Outcast Chapter 24 Yavin Final Part 2,” two minutes in. Everyone in the comments was making fun of him, but I felt a communion with this gamer of yesteryear, uploading his stumbling for everyone to see. I hope he’s well, wherever life took him. ■

I FELT A COMMUNION WITH THIS GAMER OF YESTERYEAR, UPLOADING HIS STUMBLING



Isn't the Force supposed to show me the way?



LEFT: Always getting calls at the most inappropriate of times...

BELOW: Exploring the galaxy, one YouTube Let's Play at a time.





“I’m grateful to it for helping to reignite a forgotten passion”

CHICORY: A COLORFUL TALE has gotten me drawing again

At the start of *Chicory: A Colorful Tale*, the paint that flowed from my magic brush felt like more of a tool for traversal than anything else. But as my abilities grew and I brought more and more color back to the world, I was encouraged to paint more. As I pondered puzzles, trees were turning green, lakes, and rivers blue, my protagonist, Tiramisu, brown, yellow, and pink.

Later, instead of a colorless world to restore, the game gave me a blank canvas and asked me to paint a portrait of Chicory, a cape-wearing hare. Taking the limited tools at my disposal into account, I was pleased with my efforts: Blotchy, but at least discernibly lagomorphic. Chicory’s painting of Tiramisu was somewhat more accomplished, but I’m guessing whichever artist was responsible for it wasn’t using the game’s primary color-based palette and a gaming mouse to create their work.

Later still, Tiramisu faced another canvas, this time tasked with painting

ALI JONES



THIS MONTH
Wanted to replace his headshot with a self-portrait.

ALSO PLAYED
Ruined King: A League of Legends Story

a self-portrait. I took up the ‘brushes’ again, but now with more confidence than before. The controls were still a bit awkward, the color-scheme kind of random, but by the time I’d finished, I was impressed. And that new-found assuredness leaked into the rest of the game, entire swathes of the land of Picnic recolored by both the game’s increasing complexity and my drive to paint.

I studied art all the way up until I left school, but since leaving university, I can count the number of

ABOVE: Tiramisu, ‘Self’. Magical paintbrush on digital canvas.

times that I’ve sat down and tried to draw something on the fingers of one hand. Every time *Chicory* handed me its charming but simple set of artistic tools, I found myself wanting more. The game itself wasn’t designed to give it to me—Tiramisu is notably not an accomplished artist—but I wanted something that would let me create as freely as *Chicory* was prepared to let me.

ART SGOOL

Eventually, having never used one before, I asked my girlfriend if I could dig out her old drawing tablet. Now, some of the time I might have spent playing a new game is spent learning how my new art gear works. As well as rediscovering old skills, I’m working out new ones, such as how to use layering and opacity to build up an image, digital blending, and not reaching for a non-existent eraser when I make a mistake. *Chicory: A Colorful Tale* doesn’t ask for any of that know-how, but for all the wit and charm that it offers, I’m most grateful to it for helping to reignite a forgotten passion. ■

THE GAME GAVE ME A BLANK CANVAS, AND ASKED ME TO PAINT A PORTRAIT



MINECRAFT 1.18

Amazing views in Caves & Cliffs Part 2. *By Lauren Morton*

The new *Minecraft* version 1.18 has arrived, bringing with it giant changes to the way that worlds are generated. Mountains now stretch up into towering Frozen Peaks biomes the likes of which earlier versions never would have created. Massive caves are open along the surface, earthen maws ready to swallow you down to deepslate depths without warning. Entire mountains are hollow, filled with new Lush Cave interiors. Each new world I visit has landscapes that are dauntingly large, excessively strange, and ultimately fascinating in the way *Minecraft* was when I first played it.

Back in 2010, *Minecraft* was still in alpha. This was long before its blocky visuals became a popularly mimicked aesthetic, before the crafting survival frenzy that it inspired, and back before procedurally generated worlds became more common. In the early 2010s, *Minecraft* was magical. Every time I started a fresh world, I was excited just to see what it was capable of creating.

In the years since, *Minecraft* has become a toy box full of known unknowns—when a new mob is added, we ask whether it's tameable,

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 30, 2021

DEVELOPER
Mojang

PUBLISHER
Microsoft

LINK
minecraft.net

and what it drops when killed, while a new ore often signals new tools we'll craft with it. *Minecraft* has provided thousands of hours of fun, but becoming a global phenomenon has required Mojang to sand off the rough edges. It's not nearly as weird as it once was.

NEXT GENERATION

In 1.18, *Minecraft* feels magical again, recapturing some of the original tech demo flair that I'd missed. I've randomly generated dozens of worlds in 1.18, and each one feels like *Minecraft* is a system re-committed to surprising me.

So what is it that's actually changed? Several things. The actual ceiling and floor of *Minecraft* worlds has been raised, meaning that they are both 64 blocks taller and deeper than before. Up on the surface, this means postcard-worthy mountain ranges with more towering peaks and precipitous cliffs. I've seen *Minecraft* worlds with this style of dramatic scenery before, but it's typically been sculpted with third-party tools like

World Painter. *Minecraft* now rivals those builds right out of the box.

Impressive as they are, you may not spawn in a mountain range when you create your first 1.18 world. What you will stumble across—and perhaps into—are the new caves.

Caves no longer have any chill whatsoever. Forget coyly stopping at block level 40 or so. In 1.18 I'm constantly tripping over giant tears in the earth that descend, seemingly never ending, into the deepest layers of the earth. It's not uncommon to ride a waterfall down a ravine, pass by a cavern of dripstone stalactites, spill into an underground lake, and then continue on down until I'm surrounded by the deepslate stone



CAVES NO LONGER HAVE ANY CHILL WHATSOEVER

that now defines the lowest layers of the world just above bedrock.

Version 1.18 also brings a subtler change: The separation of terrain and biome. Biomes and structures are able to generate on different terrain shapes, meaning that combinations previously created by sub biomes like Desert Hills and Badlands Plateau now exist naturally. Mountains freely spawn with spruce forests climbing their edges, while deserts transition from hills to shores at will.

The unleashed terrain is most evident in villages, which is my favorite part of *Caves & Cliffs Part 2*. Now that villages can spawn in a biome of any shape, they're often warped in wild ways that I enjoy dissecting. Lone houses often stand apart on outcroppings. Villages fall into chasms, climb mountains, and span rivers. Their paths trickle down unlikely cliffs, attempting to connect a cobblestone temple to a library ten blocks down. Villages in 1.18 exemplify the weirdness that I missed in *Minecraft*. It's still a big sandbox full of rules, more capable than ever of spitting out new worlds.

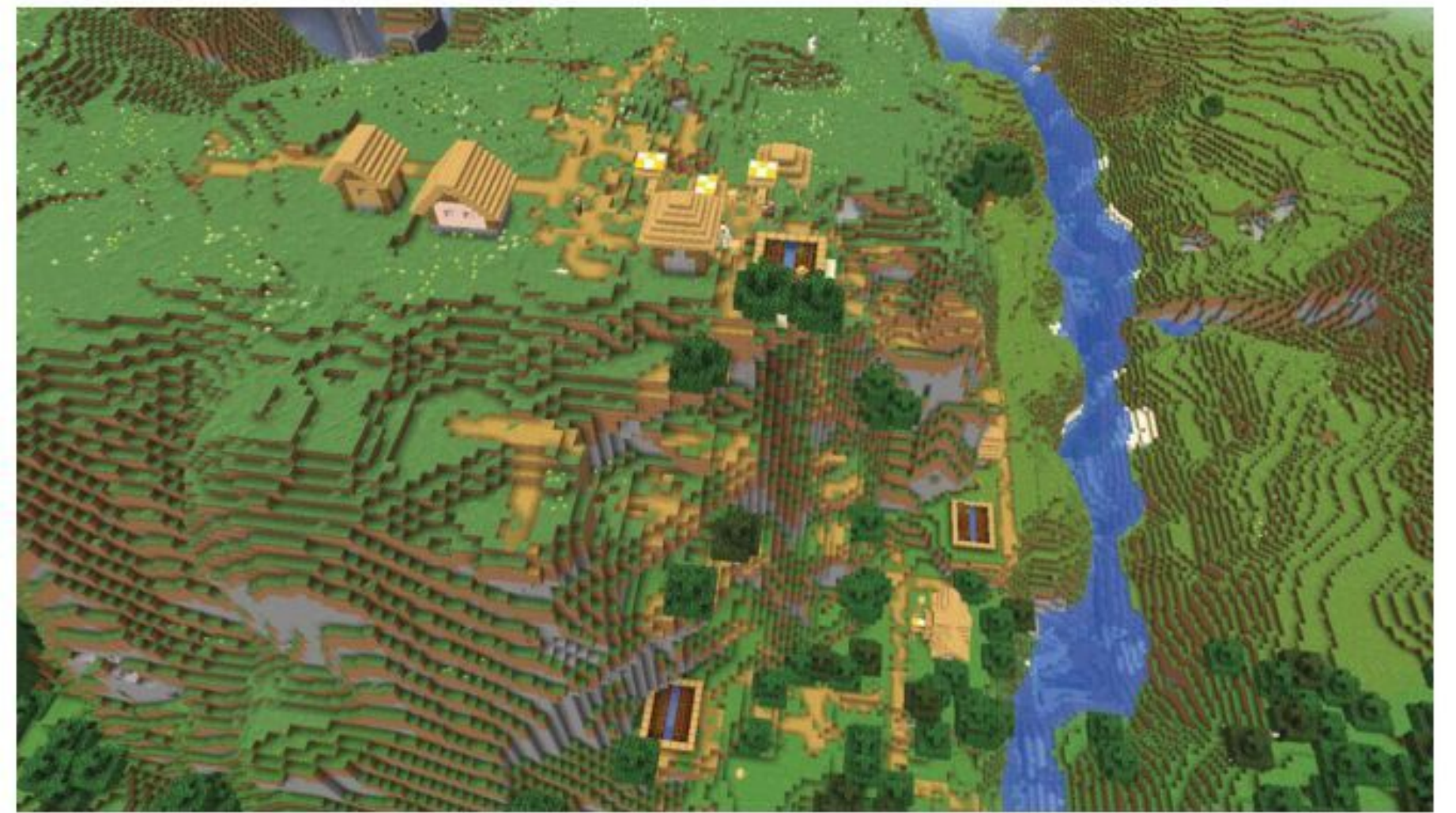
Fear not, *Minecraft* hasn't become entirely alien overnight. Idyllic meadows and swaths of swamp are all still there, now with the added promise that avid explorers and builders won't ever have to walk far to find some impressive new view for their next base. ■

VILLAGE SPILLAGE

Case study of a 1.18 tourist trap



1. The village center, where things make sense
2. Non-standard terrain: a civil planning nightmare
3. A completely inaccessible field, of course
4. Two villagers, understandably lost
5. Paths: Either non-existent or capitulated



ABOVE: Villages are struggling a bit with the new terrain.

FAR LEFT: Impressive mountain ranges are now more common in version 1.18.

LEFT: New multitiered caves now seem to be endlessly deep.



Some caves even generate inside hollow mountains.



TOP: You have to be pretty quick-fingered if you want to win a joust.



The sport of kings:
Slugging back way
too much ale.



LEFT: Jousts can be friendly. Unless you're not friends.

CAST AWAY

A few of our favorite fishing minigames



SEA OF THIEVES

Lots of lovely fish to catch, and the water you pull them out of is the most beautiful in all of games.



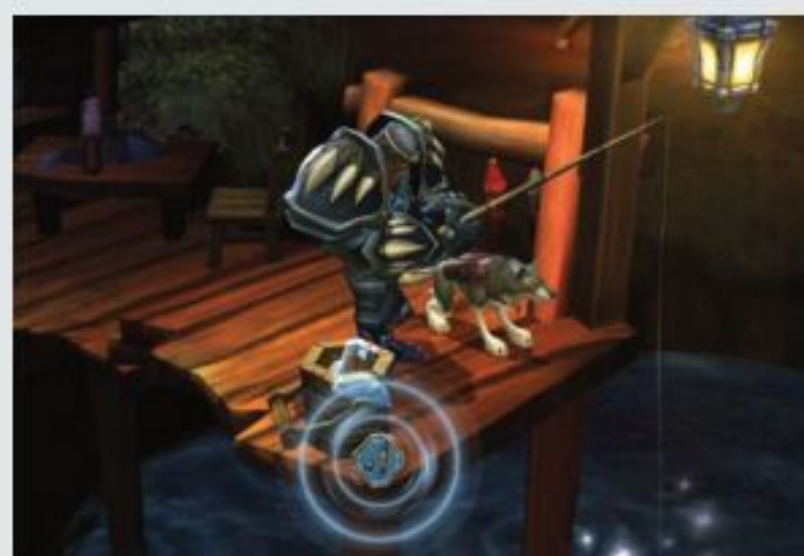
FAR CRY 5

Extremely relaxing, though there is a good chance of being mauled by a mountain lion while fishing.



NEW WORLD

Forget grinding out quests and going to war. I got to level 23 by basically just fishing.



TORCHLIGHT

Not that complex, but the fish you catch can turn your pet into a bat, spider, or fire elemental. Neato!

TAVERN GAMES

Chilling out in *Crusader Kings III*. *By Christopher Livingston*

Crusader Kings III is a grand strategy game filled with earth-shaking wars, vendettas that can play out over generations, assassinations, intrigue, drama, and tangled narratives that promise a new twist around every corner. But sometimes you just want to chill out by going fishing, or have a drinking contest in a smelly pub with a pal. Right?

There are already plenty of distractions in *Crusader Kings III*. You can initiate events like great feasts or hunts, and they'll play out with a few narrative choices along the way. You can make decisions like founding a witch coven or a holy order, try to escape prison or build a monument, or strengthen your bloodline, and the outcomes will be based on elements like your attributes and random chance. However, there's no reflex-based activities in *CKIII*, nothing to engage those twitch skills.

The *Tavern Games* mods, created by modder Castox, change that by adding four little minigames to *Crusader Kings III*. They're not complicated, though they can be extremely tricky, and they make a nice little addition to the constant list of distractions that pull you away from managing your empire responsibly.

GET HOOKED

Take fishing, for instance. With the weight of the kingdom on your shoulders, with your family members scheming and soldiers massing near your borders, why not take a break, head to the lake, and enjoy some quiet time with a rod and reel? With the *Gone Fishing* mod installed, you just need to go to the decisions menu, the same place where you'd go

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE September 1, 2020	DEVELOPER Paradox Interactive
PUBLISHER In-house	LINK bit.ly/3pQOE3e

to begin a pilgrimage, host a feast, or call a hunt. But this is an activity just for you. Choose to go fishing, and you'll find your ruler standing on a rocky shore holding a fishing rod with a few buckets beside them, ready to catch some cod.

After you cast a line and wait for a little bit, you'll get a bite. Two vertical



YOU'VE BECOME NOT JUST A RULER BUT A MASTER FISHERMAN

meters will appear on your screen—one represents the fish, the other how close you are to catching it. The fish meter will have a small red square that rises and falls, and you need to keep your icon on it to reel your fish in. That means clicking your left mouse button to move your icon up and stop clicking to let it fall. As the square slides up and down you'll have to concentrate and quickly click (or quickly stop clicking) to keep up with it. The other meter will fill with green—the more green, the closer you are to landing your fish. If you let the green drain and the meter is empty, the fish escapes.

You're not just catching generic fish to pass the time mind you. There are salmon, catfish, tuna, dorado, pike, brill, and others—16 different types of fish in all. Catch them all and you've become not just a ruler but a master

» fisherman. What's especially nice about it is that it uses your actual ruler's 3D portrait (with its back turned) on the screen instead of some generic model, so it really does feel like your character is fishing. Yes, you can even use a child if you happen to be playing as one, though it won't show the rod or fishing animations. Is your character a nudist? One of my characters is a nudist, part of a religious sect that doesn't believe in wearing clothing, and I sent him fishing, too. Sure enough, his bare butt was showing the entire time. I hope he's particularly careful with those fishhooks...

CHUG, CHUG

Once you've caught all the fish you want, it's time for something a bit more competitive. How about a drinking contest? This *Tavern Game* mod is called *Drink Up!* and you can use it to invite someone to visit the pub and engage in a frenzied bout of chugging ale. Find a character in the game you want to drink with, and right-click on them. If it's possible to challenge them (the Pope, for instance, would not accept my challenge) you'll see the option there in the drop down. Depending on how far they live from you, it may take a few days for them to reach the pub. But once they've arrived, it's time to get thirsty.

And you're not just drinking, you're betting. You can set your wager on the right side of the screen and adjust the amount of gold you want to bet. Then start the drinking game. A circle will appear on the right side of the screen, and will immediately begin shrinking. Click the drink button when it's as small as possible. It'll reappear at full size, and begin to shrink again. Keep in mind, this happens very, very quickly. It's like trying to time the beats in a rhythm game, and the smaller the blue circle is when you click the button, the more you'll gulp down. You'll also see a meter showing how much ale is left in your mug, and your opponent's, and you'll refill it when it's empty. The game lasts for three drinks, and the first one to finish, wins. It's not a bad way to make some gold if you're quick enough, but it's just as easy to lose everything in your purse.

Maybe you're looking for a minigame that actually has an effect on your story in *Crusader Kings III*? Another *Tavern Game* mod can win

or lose you some gold, but also some prestige. It's called *Big Shot!* and it's an archery competition mod. It's also extremely difficult. Again, begin by finding another character and challenging them. If they accept (and you both have the 50 gold required as stakes) you'll meet them on the range. There you can engage in a bit of practice, which I would recommend, before the tournament starts.

Move your mouse around to aim high, medium, or low, depending on where the archery dummy is (and how big it is). Hold the left mouse button to ready an arrow, which will also set a target moving up and down along the dummy. When the target aligns with the small red zone on the dummy, that means you've maxed out your accuracy. But that's not all you need to do to win. You'll also need to hold down the space bar to build up power, represented by a meter on the right side of the screen. It takes lots of practice to learn how to achieve both the accuracy and power that you need to get a bullseye, and the dummy changes position and sometimes even size in each round, so it's really quite tricky.

The faster you are, the better, as the winner is decided by whoever hits the most targets in 60 seconds. The victor not only takes the prize money, but also gains prestige, so the outcome can not only help out your treasury, but your standing.

GAME OF DEATH

And finally, there's a *Tavern Game* mod that can have major repercussions on your character and others in the world. *Joust* is exactly what it sounds like—two characters riding toward each other on horses with giant lances aimed at one another. And as you might guess, it can be fatal. Challenge another



SURE ENOUGH, HIS BARE BUTT WAS SHOWING THE ENTIRE TIME

character, and you'll meet in an arena. As your horses ride toward each other, a box will appear on screen with two circles in it, red and blue. Click the arrow keys to move the blue dot over the red one, and if you do it in time the box will turn green. Click the green box once and you'll land a successful hit on your opponent. First to five hits wins.

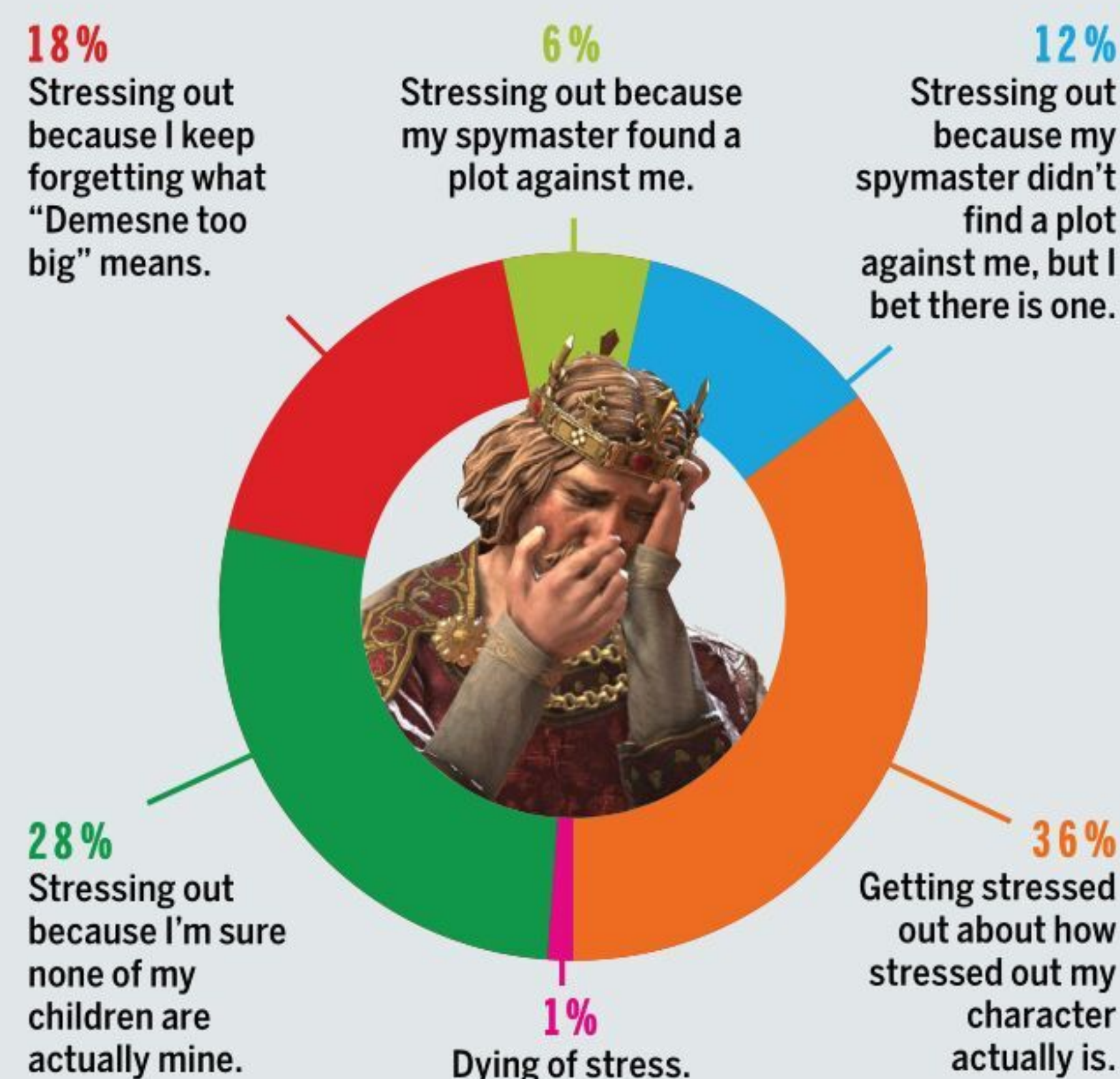
Again, you need to be a quick-clicker to pull off a hit, and you only have a few seconds to move the randomly placed dots and click the green box. Fail, and your opponent will strike you instead. The winner of the match will gain both prestige and gold, plus the victor gets to choose how smug they are about the victory. You can display good sportsmanship, taunt, or 'strongly taunt', and that will determine how the character's opinion of you will change. If you really taunt someone, they will absolutely hate you, their families will hate you, and they'll become your rival, and vice-versa.

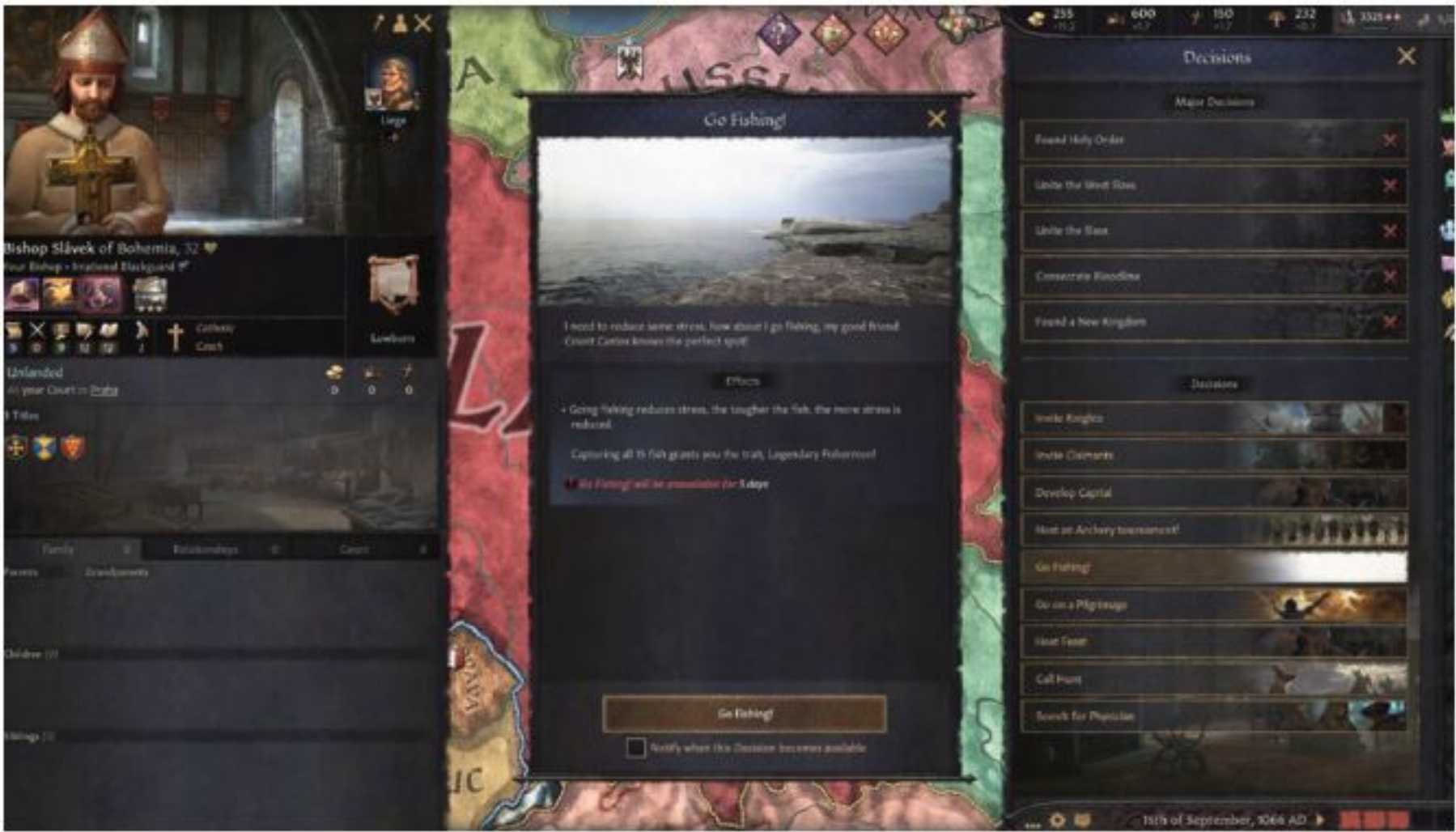
What's more, if it's a joust to the death, the consequences can be even more drastic. The victor in a deathmatch may show mercy (which will gain them a lot of renown and warm opinions), the victim can bargain for their life (with a hefty offer of gold), or the killing blow can be delivered. That's how my clothes-hating ruler died...

The *Tavern Games* mods can all be found in the Steam Workshop—either search for *Tavern Games* or Castox's Workshop. The only other mod you'll need to get them working is the *Fullscreen Barbershop* mod (it allows fullscreen portraits of your characters), which you can also find in the Steam Workshop. ■

STRESS MESS

How my time is spent in Crusader Kings III





ABOVE: The war can wait. I'm fishing.

LEFT: The Pope, when I challenged him to a big boozy beer-chugging challenge.



SUBSIST IN SKYRIM SURVIVAL MODE

Cook, eat, and sleep to endure in a tougher Tamriel. *By Harry Shepherd*

NEED TO KNOW

DIFFICULTY
Medium

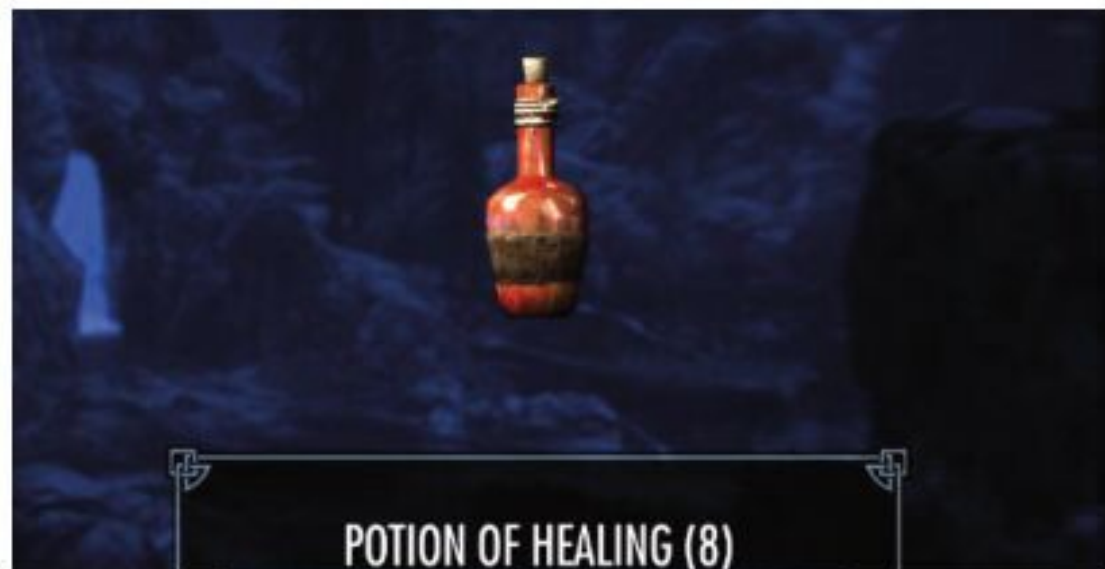
TIME
Ten hours

VITAL LINKS

Special Edition mods:
bit.ly/3ImS6Bo

Item codes:
bit.ly/31dubgC

Console commands:
bit.ly/31czs80



WALKING WOUNDED

1 There's no automatic health regeneration in Survival mode, so invest in Restoration spells early, like Healing and Close Wounds. Also, enchant your armor with health regen properties if you can, and swig plenty of restorative potions before and after battles.



PLAGUE ISLAND

2 Survival mode also adds new diseases and makes existing ones more serious. Ailments like Bone Break Fever and Brain Rot can now get 'Severe' and then 'Crippling', with more negative effects. Cure with potions or at a shrine for 100 gold.



SICK NOTE

3 Keeping track of all the potential buffs and (much more likely) debuffs Survival mode imposes on you can be overwhelming. Check them all under Active Effects in the Magic Menu, or you can view them on your HUD with the SkyUI mod.



WILD HUNT

4 Train your Dovahkiin in archery early: It helps you hunt for food, and means you're less reliant on inns. Wood elves are the race for this, as they're good with bows and stealth, and more resistant to Survival mode's harsher diseases.



TRAVEL AGENT

5 Since you can't fast travel, you'll need to plan carefully before setting out. Make a note of the handy landmarks on the map on the next page, but also ride horses and use main roads as much as possible.



PACK LIGHT

6 Your maximum carry weight is also reduced, so you can't be the hoarder you were in vanilla *Skyrim*. Choose light armor and invest in the Unhindered perk to save precious pounds: The level 50 ability means light armor weighs nothing.



THE FELLOWSHIP

7 Another way to share the load is to recruit an army of pack mules. On top of the single follower you could journey with in vanilla *Skyrim*, *Pets of Skyrim* is a Creation Club mod that lets loot-carrying creatures join you on your fantastical journey, too.

SILENT CARTOGRAPHER *Where to eat, sleep and keep warm in Skyrim*



1

FUR REAL

Skyrim's regions are split into warm, cool, and freezing. Wear warm armor, pack torches, and bring plenty of food.

2

TAVERN TALES

Always note your closest inn before traveling. There you can warm up, buy food, and sleep in a bed that resets your tiredness.

3

STIR GRAVY

Uncooked meat can give you food poisoning in Survival mode. Keep Cooking Pot spots in mind to keep going for longer.



FLAMING GOOD

8 Torches are a vital source of warmth in northern Tamriel's cooler areas. They'll slow the Cold debuff by 50%, but it's essential you bring multiple torches with you. That's especially the case on longer journeys, since they eventually run out.



CHATTERBOX

9 To avoid unnecessary repeat journeys, do as much as you can when visiting a new settlement. Chat to and pick up quests from every relevant NPC in one go so you can tick off all available opportunities without wasting precious walking time.



FEELING SALTY

10 When buying cooking ingredients, don't skimp on the salt. Pretty much all recipes in the game include salt, so buy and pilfer all you can unless you want to live on very bland vegetable soup. Fire Salts are also important for some nice, warming meals.



IN TENTS

11 Don't neglect the other handy Creation Club mods that come with *Skyrim's Anniversary Edition*. Camping gives you a place in which to sleep and keep warm; fishing a steady stream of swimming food and extra carry weight with Adventurer's Backpack.



STAY CLASSY

12 Identify and plan for the afflictions that'll be the most punishing for your character. Mages should prioritize sleep to prevent magicka caps, swordsmen must eat to protect their stamina, and everyone should keep warm to keep their health up.

HAVING A NICE HOLIDAY IN FAR CRY 2

PART I

Is it possible to stay out of trouble and just enjoy the views? *By Matt Killeen*

You emerge from the iron shack into a luminous dawn, a blue hour vision of crushed darks and saturated colors to the susurating of strings, pregnant with tension. Before you, a stretch of scrubland that peters out into the gleaming desert at the reddening horizon. But in front of that is a car.

It's a sports car of sorts, but you know this was born in a second-string factory in the '80s, its sharper corners now unfashionable, its metaphorical corners cut. Racing stripes are lost in a veneer of rust and decay. Yet you know that this car was someone's pride and joy, the result of many nightshifts and dreary days. Now it's a potent symbol of the UAC's deterioration. Misplaced money, exploitative imports, shattered dreams... Then a dust cloud in the distance signals that this moment of reverie is over, and you have to shoot someone in the face.

This moment has stayed with me for more than 13 years. It was one of the most vivid places I had ever experienced and sits with other distinct, sacred memories both real and virtual, from approaching Rapture, to the wonders of the Maasai Mara itself.

I loved *Far Cry 2*. There was atmosphere and cinematography that Vittorio Storaro would have been proud of, and a soundtrack that featured Baaba Maal. There was a lightness of touch that demonstrated that developers trusted the player to fill the blanks, if they provided an immersive enough experience. Most of all, I had dreamed of an FPS Elite, a truly open world I could live in, and approach as I saw fit, with as few breaks in the mise-en-scene as possible. I wasn't disappointed.

I loved the actual map and GPS you hold up in real-time, the healing animations, being revived then carried to safety by acquaintances and the surrounding desert providing the softest of invisible walls. All these worked to sustain immersion, even if the game's desire for verisimilitude bore contrarian fruit. The prevalent opinion was that much of it sucked.

Most were irritated by the recurrent bouts of malaria, but I thought this was genius. Likewise both sides in this war, equally mired in murder and corruption, want to kill you, regardless of what you do for them. This means that

you're being shot at, by everyone, all the time.

"I can't drive anywhere without being chased," was the common complaint amongst folk.

To which my answer was, "You *drove* places?" If you weren't hiking into the mountains to watch the sun set over the savannah between missions, you were playing the game wrong. I suppose this was where gamers began to diverge, now that the worlds were open and real enough, between those who were all about the 'splodes and mayhem, and those for whom walking simulators would later be designed. The latter would populate the hills and forests of *Day Z* and *Rust*, harried by the former, before leaving to fall in love with Delilah in *Firewatch*.

BED & WRECKFEST

I've had a hankering to return to the UAC, and it's the hiking, the sunsets, and the zebras that I'm after. A holiday. I'm not interested in the journey to the heart of darkness or the nihilism, I'm not even after the Jackal as such. He's just an optional day excursion.

So, no unnecessary deaths. No guns. No moral relativism. Just a good time.

I SUPPOSE THIS WAS WHERE GAMERS BEGAN TO DIVERGE

I get the taxi from the airport, which is how all vacations start. I see the locals flee, surrendering the battlefield to the thieving westerners. It's okay, I'm going to leave all this behind and 'see the real UAC' like some entitled backpacker.

I don't remember the intro tutorial being quite so linear though. Malaria dominates the opening scenes. I pass out and wake to meet my target, the Jackal, who quotes Nietzsche like an alt-right teen. I escape a firefight in the town without spilling blood, before losing consciousness again, to be rescued by one of the many militia parasites. He sends me on my first murder, but I'm on holiday, so I get in the waiting coupé, and try to drive

away. I hit an in-universe invisible wall—another severe dose that sends me right back to where I started. I'm not going to get any sight-seeing done until I get some medicine.

Thus, I'm stuck doing awkward stealth in a warren of narrow valleys and gloomy ravines, under overcast skies. I'm noisy without any of the buffs and get swiftly made. I can't explode a red barrel without unloading a full clip into it. I'll need a more powerful pistol at the very least. I have a shopping list already, which will require diamonds, so I have busywork to do. Between pretending my car is an 'environmental hazard', and my machete, I jump the hoops and get a lead on some meds.

I notice the GPS is now clear... So once I've got my chloroquine, or whatever, the away-break can

THE RULES

1. Avoid fights.
Only self-defence.

2. No guns.
Only takedowns and environmental kills to progress story.

3. Take holiday snaps
and have myself a lovely time.



>> begin. I wanted those savannahs, those zebras, those deserts, those skies. Now I can get them.

My memory was of walks, and views, and special one-off moments. Once I climbed a mountain and found a deserted village that belonged to a people largely untouched by the imperial West. Arriving before the mission it was designed for felt like I was rounding a corner in the Jordanian rocks and seeing Petra for the first time. At the very top of this climb, I found a hang-glider. I soared and wheeled through the blue sky, seeing the lush landscape below and the deserts beyond, the animals scattering before me. I was a bird. It was over in seconds and when it was done, it was done. They weren't marked on the map, and I never found another.

WOULD NOT RECOMMEND

Now I'm getting stuck in chokepoints, pursued by unfeasibly speedy jeeps by mercs with X-ray vision and unerring marksmanship. Anything I'm driving stops after being shot, meaning I can't outrun anyone. It's possible to avoid trouble by going round obstacles, but it requires a patience that I don't seem to possess anymore. I've been spoiled by the Rook Islands and Kyrat. My daughter and I played *Far Cry 5* together, and often stopped killing cultists to enjoy the sports and the views. It was always an easy option, even with deadly wildlife.

Laboa-Sako, the northern part of the UAC, is definitely less appealing than the south, where after a lot of grind I go on to find many of the small wonders I'm looking for. But even on the periphery of the desert where the metaphorical diamonds are, it's a lot like going on holiday to somewhere you loved as a child, but now... It's smaller, browner, less full of potential than you remember. The beaches smaller, the arcades short of games, each one less thrilling than it was but ten times the price. There are still small beauties to find, but if you've been to Vegas, Prestatyn seems tiny, because it is.

But I see my animals, managing not to hit them all with my car. I see some sunsets and some amazing vistas. I get rained on, a lot, which spoils the pictures, but that's holidays for you. And I find my ancient village, but it's full of ex-pat monsters with mortars. I suppose, at least in this game, if I shot someone in the head, they'll die, unlike the less considerate soldiers of Yara.

TREAD LIGHTLY

A few of the animals I accidentally killed



RED-FRONTED GAZELLE (EUDORCAS RUFIFRONS)
Related to Thomson's gazelle, second fastest animal on Earth. Unfortunately for this subject, it's still slower than a Jeep.



GREVY'S ZEBRA (EQUUS GREVYI)
Also known as the imperial zebra. Considered endangered, especially when it runs in front of a moving dune buggy.



SUDAN BUFFALO (SYNCERUS CAFFER BRACHYCEROS)
A subspecies of the African buffalo that gores and kills more than 200 people every year. This was basically self-defense.



AFRIKANER MERCENARY (HOMO SAPIENS)
I guess all roads lead to the corpses of mercenaries eventually, but, I can explain, really! This one was only tangentially involved.

And that's the rub. This time, I'm on vacation, but for someone on safari, I'm spending a lot of time machete-ing people to death. It's all necessary self-defense, of course, but I might as well be using a gun. So, accepting that rules are made to be broken, I grind and arm myself with the M-79 Grenade Launcher...

START OF DARKNESS

The sub-text of *Far Cry 2*, such as it is, retreads Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, or more precisely Coppola's *Apocalypse Now*. The assassin travels through a ravaged world in search of the one most responsible for it, inevitably adopting the same methods, and in doing so,

is infected by the same sickness, literally and figuratively. Opinion is sharply divided as to whether Conrad's masterwork is a vicious takedown of European colonialism, or a deeply othering piece of racism, with the smarter money being on both. The concept was better served by *Spec Ops: The Line*, but it remains the de facto theme of the *Far Cry* series, with wildly contrasting success and states of dissonance.

The first-time round, I became very good at it all, slipping unnoticed from place to place and playing both sides against each other. Slowly, these mercenaries began to talk of me with fear in their voices. And I was a monster. I would shoot someone in the leg so his cries would attract his friends to my headshot party. This was okay, because everyone was a





I waited a long time to get the morning sun for this shot. Also I killed eleven people.

I SEE THE ROADBLOCK AND TRY TO DRIVE ROUND IT, BUT I'M DARING THEM TO SPOT ME

Western, colonial interloper with no business in the UAC except exploitation and greed. Finally, I tired of being a shadow and the ennui born of invincibility, I swapped my sniper rifle for a rocket launcher or two. I destroyed everything. The people, the buildings, the vehicles, the trees and grass. I blazed with the brightness of a thousand suns. I knew then it was time for the endgame, to face the Jackal... and discover a warlord who had come to regret his actions, just as I had come to revel in mine.

Having the M-79 again makes killing effortless. Satisfying. I see the roadblock and try to drive round it, but I'm daring them to spot me. "Just try it," I think. That becomes, "I'll teach you for messing up my Jeep." I

thought it would make the killing less disturbing, but it just makes it less personal, even funny. It's changing the nature of the trip. My notion of a good time shifts.

The idea of snatching a few minutes of magical serenity between the serious business of surviving a civil war, as a counterpoint to the violence, the corruption and decay... that worked. It made the sky, the sun, the animals, the desert sand and forests sacrosanct... all immune to the violence. Killing people so I can enjoy them in peace is taking the edge off that awe. I'm slaughtering mercenaries, because I can't get to the hang-gliders. I'm worse than the monster waiting for me at that final pass, worse than the man who hunted him 13 years ago.

The Jackal misunderstands his Nietzsche, of course. There's nothing inevitable about what happens in the UAC. The 'power' in 'will to power' isn't Kraft—control and force—it's Macht—sublimation, overcoming the self and selfish, the channelling of force for creativity.

I look at my photographs. Is that what I've done? Yuck. I need a shower. ■



Lots of expensive cars just lying around a warzone.





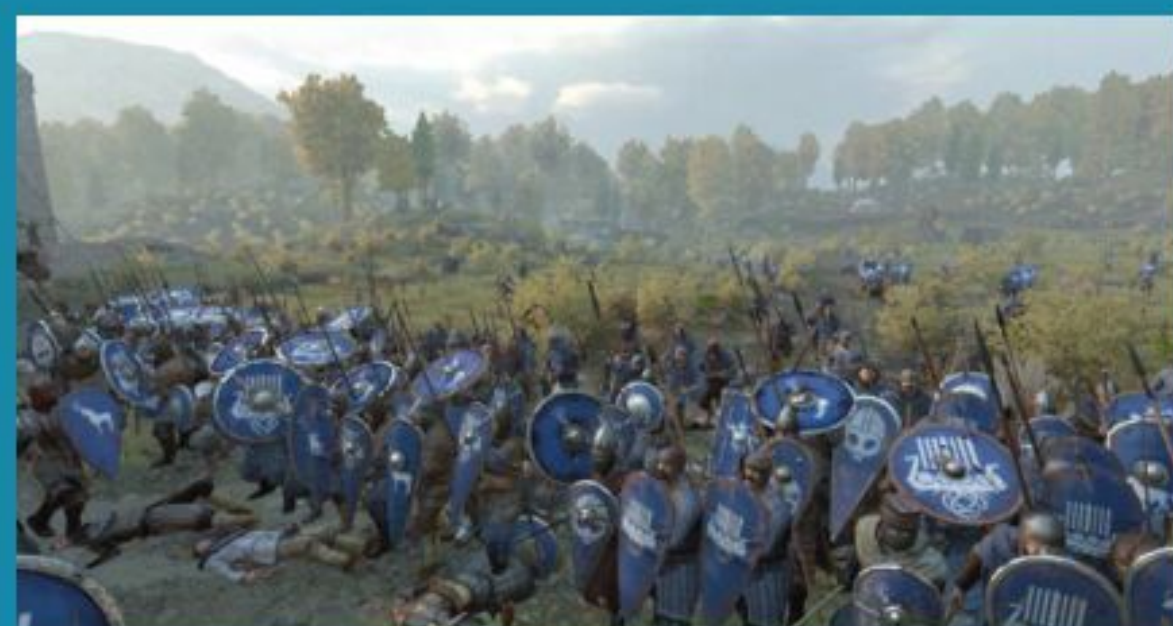
WHY I LOVE

WHAT MAKES GAMES SPECIAL

PLAYING EASY MODE IN

MOUNT & BLADE 2: BANNERLORD

The fine line between heroics and horror. *By Lincoln Carpenter*



RIGHT: A ballista marksman ponders the effective range of a Sturgian invader's throwing axe.



In the 400-something hours I've clocked in the *Mount and Blade* games, I've rarely bumped the difficulty above easy. It only provides a handful of bonuses: Reduced damage, decreased troop upkeep, a speed boost on the overworld map. But as those bonuses interact with all of *Mount and Blade's* systems, they cascade until your character has a gravity that pulls the game off its axis, and into chaos. It's a rare image of protagonism, with you playing the monster.

It would be terrifying to share a world with a player character. You'd be coexisting with someone who literally operates under a different set of rules, casually warping reality as easily as they breathe. They act in ways that you can't, and the world reacts in ways it won't for you. For no discernible reason, the universe has chosen them as its sole fascination.

In plenty of cases, there's in-universe justification to paint over the existential horror: The main character's the chosen one of some divine entity, went to the best secret agent school, or has a dragon's soul in there somewhere. But games where your character's theoretically just as mundane as anyone else can turn into a kind of morbid spectacle.

Imagine you're the Vlandian noble from my recent *Bannerlord* campaign. For the last month, you've heard rumors of a stranger who appeared as if from nowhere. With only a dozen peasants, they've stamped out the region's banditry, carting in apprehended highwaymen for the city ransom brokers. Now

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
March 30, 2020

DEVELOPER
TaleWorlds Entertainment

PUBLISHER
In-house

LINK
bit.ly/31fNQ3

BANNERLORE

Study of a pillaging protagonist

- 1 Hungry, loot-appraising gaze.
- 2 Axe paid for with dozens of tons of stolen butter.
- 3 Shield with custom bad Sonic fanart heraldry (not shown).
- 4 Hauberk won with uncanny bludgeoning talent in melee tourney.
- 5 Steadfast equine comrade, inevitable arrow magnet.



they stand before you, offering their services as a mercenary in your king's war effort. You can't be blamed for what follows. You see only a probably-filthy vigilante; how could you know they're just one cavalry lance of mercenary wages away from being a regicidal apex predator?

Within a month of sealing their contract, you have cause for concern.

DEATH CASUALLY OVERLOOKS THOSE WHO FIGHT UNDER THEIR COMMAND

The first time you fight alongside the stranger, you watch bewildered as they wade into the fray, shrugging off blows that should be fatal. Death casually overlooks those who fight under their command—in weeks, their pitchfork-wielding companions become an elite fighting force, leaping through upgrade tiers and hundreds of weapon skill points.

Your peers share strange stories: How even merchants in enemy holdings seem incapable of refusing every blunted axe the stranger offers

to barter for fresh provisions. Another lord swears he watched them leave their own horse mid-battle to leap into the saddle of the Imperial cavalryman they'd just skewered, only to see "how much higher its handling rating was".

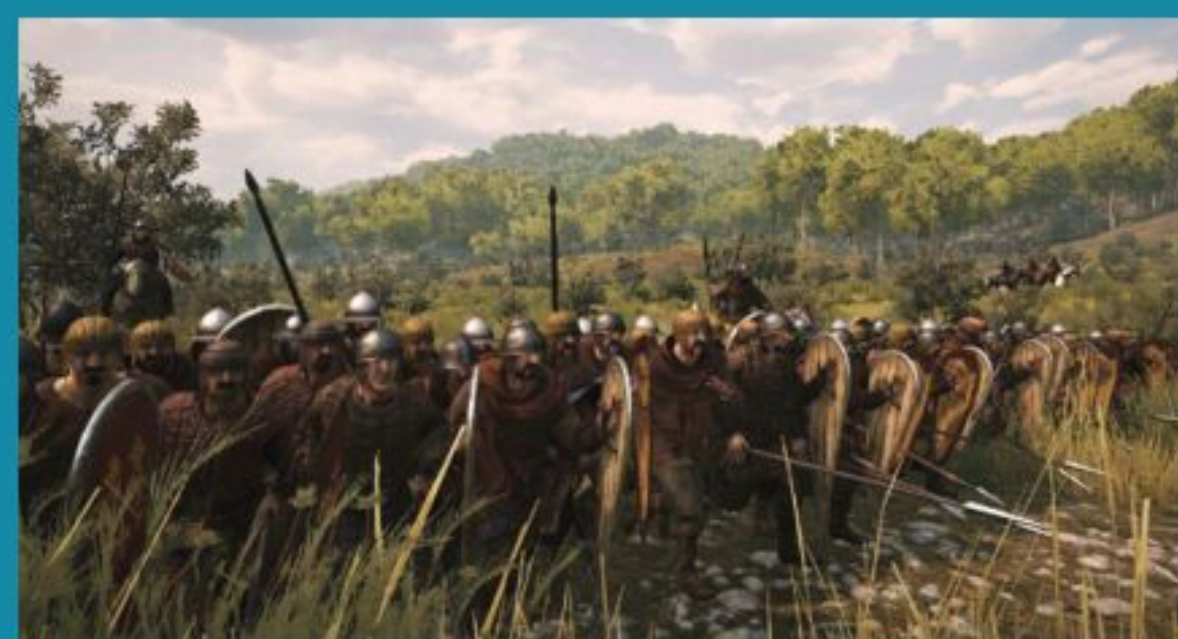
When the king grants the stranger vassalage and the realm's poorest fief as a token for their wartime contributions, your fellows in the nobility reassure themselves, insisting he'll have no cause to entertain the upstart's ambition. Within weeks, you watch as the stranger conquers the coastal city of Ortysia with only 200 soldiers, besting a fortified garrison four times their number. As the city's new lord, they linger long enough to appoint someone to tend its affairs.

KINGDOM RUSH

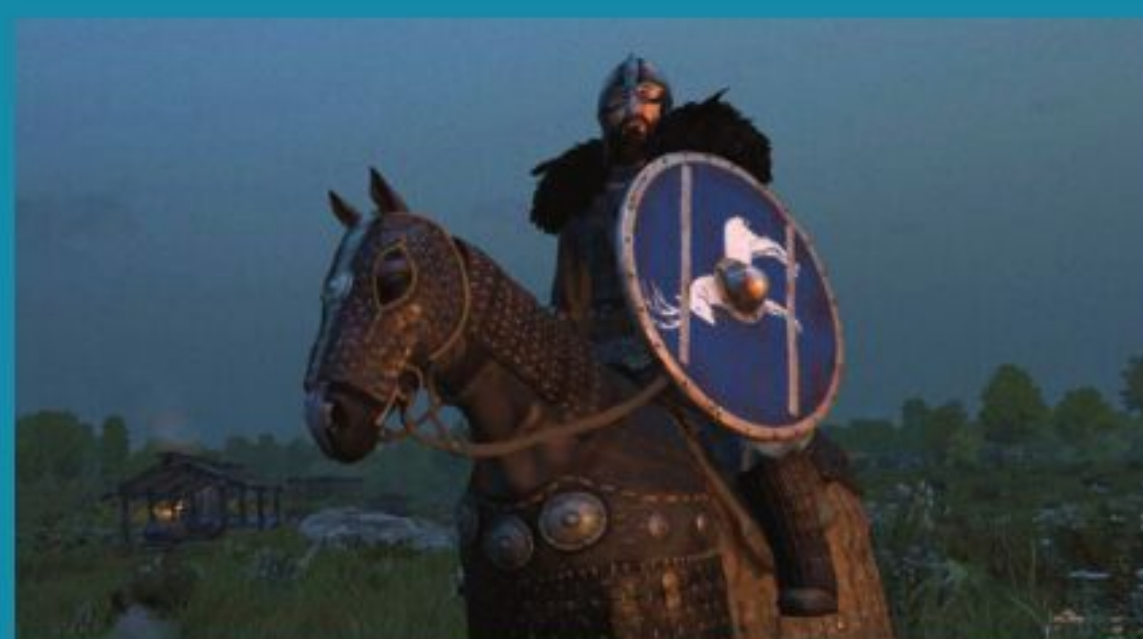
Years pass. You can't remember how many wars have followed the Western Empire's fall. Some of its lords sit beside you at Vlandia's court, while your closest countrymen kneel to other crowns—fealty is fickle, when the only thing between you and the cost of rebuilding your armies is a warrior's attention span.

Meanwhile, despite the newly-declared war against Battania, they've ridden off to the far side of the Calradian continent. Their warband followed, robbing Vlandia of its most capable defenders just so they could see how they look with one of those cool helmets the Khuzaits sell.

On their return journey, they happen across the Battanian king's party in the field, prompting the stranger's realization that they've never seen what happens when they behead a monarch. It's just the latest terror in a world where the stranger's victories are an inevitability. You take solace, at least, in the fact that it hasn't occurred to them to declare their own kingdom. You have no way of knowing they need just a few more battles' worth of renown to do so. ■



LEFT: Vlandian militia begin to charge. Off-screen, their enemies calculate their gear's sell price.





VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE—BLOODLINES

Troika's last hurrah has aged like fine wine. *By Ted Litchfield*

The year of 2004 was an auspicious one for videogames. In fact, it was perhaps, a bit *too* auspicious for Troika, a small CRPG development house headed by ex-Black Isle veterans.

Troika had to release an embattled, over budget, and unfinished game of a niche genre right smack dab in the middle of a legendary autumn, which also boasted *Halo 2*, *Half-Life 2*, and *Metal Gear Solid 3*. *Vampire: The*

Masquerade—Bloodlines never stood a chance really, and ended up selling only 72,000 copies in its initial release. Afterwards, Troika struggled to find backing for subsequent projects, and were forced to close their doors in 2005.

The tapes never stopped circulating though, so to speak. Strong word of mouth helped its reputation flourish on RPG forums, and *VtMB* found a second life through digital distribution. This game was not on my radar at the time

of its initial release, and even if it was, I was nine years old, and my dad would have immediately put the kibosh on any attempt on my part to play this M-rated game with a scantily-clad, blood-spattered, Harley Quinn-looking lady on the cover. No, like most of its fans, I came to *Bloodlines* years later, drawn by that strong hearsay. A lot of its design choices frustrated me my first time around, and I put off finishing that first playthrough for almost half a year. Despite that, it's a game I simply could not get out of my head, and I found myself diving in for another go.

UNFINISHED, UNBROKEN

Bloodlines was released in a rather rough state, on account of its disastrous development, but these days it's pretty polished as far as capital-h Huge overly ambitious RPGs go. The fan-made *Unofficial Patch*, spearheaded by the heroic Werner Spahl or Wesp5 on Reddit and ModDB really cleans up *VtMB*'s

NEED TO KNOW

RELEASE
November 16, 2004

DEVELOPER
Troika

PUBLISHER
Activision

LINK
bit.ly/3p3jqFA



ABOVE: The Tremere Chantry, LA's home for all that is spooky and profane.



The Giovanni Mansion, an S-tier 'vertical slice' sort of level if there ever was one.

RIGHT: I want to eat the worst omelette of my life at this diner.



act. Its basic version should be the first thing you download when going off Steam or physical install, but is actually already included in the GOG version of the game, thankfully.

I decided to take things just a step further this time around. Spahl also offers a more extensive 'plus' version of his patch, which includes quality of life fixes, cut content, and some bonus character creation options. I decided to forgo it on my first playthrough, purity of the developers' vision and all that, but this time I

figured, what the hell, let's try something new.

FINAL NIGHTS

Vampire: The Masquerade—Bloodlines is set in the World of Darkness tabletop setting created by White Wolf Publishing. WoD's fiction is predicated on the ghoulies, ghosties, wolfmen, and of course, Draculas of classic cinema hiding in plain sight in our modern times, or 'the Final Nights'. Modern vampires are descendants of the biblical Cain,

THE GAME FOUND A SECOND LIFE THROUGH DIGITAL DISTRIBUTION

the first murderer, and fear the return of him or his immediate progeny, the apocalyptic Gehenna. It's in this context that your character in *VtMB* is first embraced by a member of Los Angeles' vampire underground, and brought into the fold.

In *Bloodlines*, you choose a vampire clan at character creation, which covers a combined race/class role. My first time through, I went with clan Malkavian, mad prophets whose special insight into the vampire condition sets them apart from their fellow kindred. In *Bloodlines'* ruleset, they get some special abilities that help with stealth and conversations. The big draw for me was that Malks have all of their dialogue completely rewritten in the spirit of *Fallout's* low-intelligence playthrough, and other characters react accordingly.

This time around, I opted for clan Tremere, secretive blood-wizards who seek to understand their curse by way of academic study. They get

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

My favorite freaks of LA by night



JACK

A vampire biker voiced by Bender 'Bending' Rodriguez himself, John DiMaggio. One of the few who's actually looking out for you.



BECKETT

An adventurer-archeologist who can turn into a wolf, Beckett's like the Volo/Elminster of *Vampire: The Masquerade*.



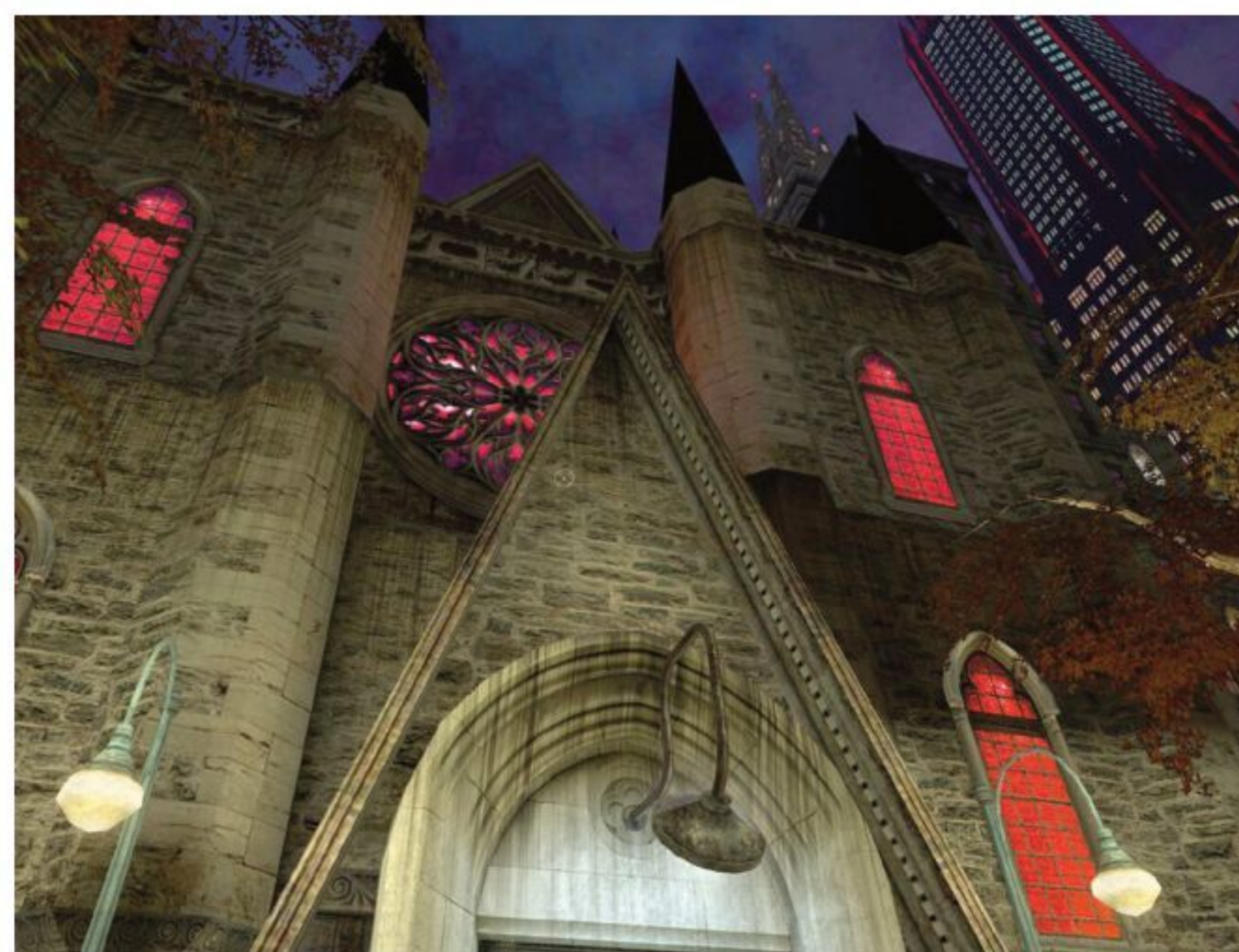
DAMSEL

A foul-mouthed communist aligned with the freedom-loving Anarchs. I just really want to buy a bootleg of her L'Armee Troika shirt.



STRAUSS

Aldi-brand Morpheus here is the Tremere Regent of LA. He'll soup up your powers, and offer *VtMB's* version of *New Vegas'* Mr House ending.



ABOVE: Help a bunch of dorks with a club in a church, just like in *Disco Elysium*.

LEFT: Big trouble, little China.

» some bonus dialogue options by way of their 'dominate' special ability, but the real draw is thaumaturgy. Thaumaturgy is the in-game representation of that signature Tremere blood magic, and it rips. The skill's progression begins with a blood-based magic missile that, when timed right, has effectively infinite ammo. Later thaumaturgy skills include an AoE stun and a highly damaging blood explosion.

These fun Tremere abilities completely changed the game for me. My problem when I booted up *Bloodlines* for my first playthrough was that I'd heard all these comparisons to immersive sims, especially *Deus Ex*. I approached VtMB as I typically approach those sorts of games: opting for perfect, non-lethal stealth. The issue is that

while *Bloodlines* shares a first person perspective and similar commitment to player agency as immersive sims, it's coming at these ideas from a completely different lineage of game design: CRPGs like *Fallout* or Troika's previous effort, *Arcanum*. *Bloodlines*' levels are too cramped, its enemy AI simultaneously too dumb and too unpredictable, for it to be played like a stealth game. When I abandoned stealth and subtlety and went in loud, slinging blood missiles around and letting my only concession to pacifism be dialogue checks, I found myself really enjoying its combat despite *Bloodlines*' sluggish, early 2000s action RPG mechanics.

I'm still kicking myself for how much I got in the way of my own fun that first playthrough, but I'd argue it's a huge point in *Bloodlines*' favor

that even such sub-optimal and unsupported styles of play can still see you through right to the very end of the game.

CRYPT KEEPER

VtMB's early game had me excited and invested right away, just like the first time, a rare thing in a genre that loves beating around the bush in starting villages. The first hub you get to explore, Santa Monica, is a fantastic introduction to *Bloodlines*' whole aesthetic, melding classic noir with an early 2000s punk raver vibe (think the dorks Neo hangs out with at the beginning of the Matrix).

I progressed through *Bloodlines*' critical path opting for mostly the same resolutions of quests and moral choices (I'm a big softy and I don't know how to be mean, even in games), but experienced something new in the form of some Tremere-exclusive content and a cut questline added back in by Wesp5.

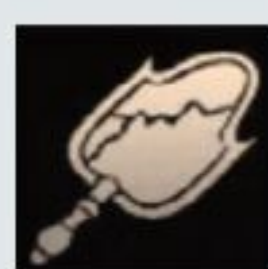
Tremere players get access to a bonus player home and some thaumaturgy power ups by chatting up resident vampire archwizard, Maximillian Strauss, and completing sidequests in his favor. Forming a working relationship with Strauss in the early game does not lock you into

BLOOD>WATER *The most interesting clans to play*



TREMERE

These mysterious vampire wizards have some of the most fun and powerful combat abilities in the game, as well as unique content that doesn't upend the whole experience like the other two listed here.



MALKAVIAN

They're kooky, they're spooky, they can see the future, they just can't communicate it to anyone else. Every dialogue option in the game gets rewritten to reflect Malkavian mad prophet-speak.



NOSFERATU

A fun option for an NG+ challenge run, Nosferatu are so dang ugly that many sidequests are closed off for them, and they have to traverse the world by sewer to avoid getting attacked on sight.



the ending where you align with him, so even Tremere kindred who favor the freedom loving, dorky good guy Anarch faction, like I do, have good reason to help him out.

Wesp5's reconstructed quest involving the downtown LA library leaves a bit to be desired. Most frustrating for me was its early stages, where you have to track down notes scattered across the city in the cut content interiors he added back in. It's very neat to see these areas, like a cigar club, or a recently shuttered bistro, but you don't really do anything in them aside from pick up the note, which then leads you to your next objective.

It all culminates with a boss fight in the library against a teleporting vampire assassin (very cool), which you only reach after a puzzle section that penalizes you for killing any of the hostile human guards in it (not so cool). A final hurdle is a persistent bug, which traps you in the library on quest completion, whose only resolution is console commands. At the time of my playthrough, it had not been resolved. The most impressive thing here is definitely the way the quest's final boss can be seen stalking you throughout the game, G-Man style.

THESE FUN TREMERE ABILITIES COMPLETELY CHANGED THE GAME FOR ME

It integrates him with the pre-existing story and is a clever idea.

TO LIVE FOREVER

The quest, QoL fixes, and roleplaying options added in by the plus patch are certainly appreciated, but the most critical addition is one, single door. *Bloodlines'* weakest moments are a handful of completely linear, combat-mandatory dungeon slogs, the favored self-sabotage of moody, cerebral RPGs everywhere. The worst of the lot is a positively inexcusable sewer sequence at the halfway point. It's about twenty to forty-five minutes of no story, no dialogue, just long corridors with high-hitpoint flesh monsters jumping out at you and an apocalyptically fiddly water-pump puzzle that I bypassed with the noclip cheat on my first playthrough. The plus patch adds in a shortcut to the very end a little less than a quarter of the way through the sewers, and *Bloodlines* is infinitely richer for it.



I can't end without bringing up my favorite part of the game, the Giovanni Mansion mission late in the main quest. A secretive, ancient clan is holding your priceless McGuffin, and a big soirée at their base of operations gives you the perfect opportunity to sneak in and steal it back. I favored the social approach, smooth talking a guest outside into giving you an invitation and ingratiating yourself with competing Giovanni factions to your own ends. But you're also free to sneak your way through, bypassing the need for an invitation and getting in and out without a trace. While the combat bloodbath is often the most boring way forward in an RPG, here it provides an encounter with a bonus boss, the Giovanni elder Bruno, who you don't even have the chance to talk to in the other paths. This player freedom, upheld by quality writing and worldbuilding, exemplifies everything I love about *Bloodlines*.

So if you dig RPGs and are at all on the fence, go and grab *Vampire: the Masquerade—Bloodlines* off your digital distributor of choice. Just be sure to get the plus patch too, I don't want your love of this game to wither in an awful sewer full of flesh monsters like mine briefly did. ■

ROBIN
VALENTINE

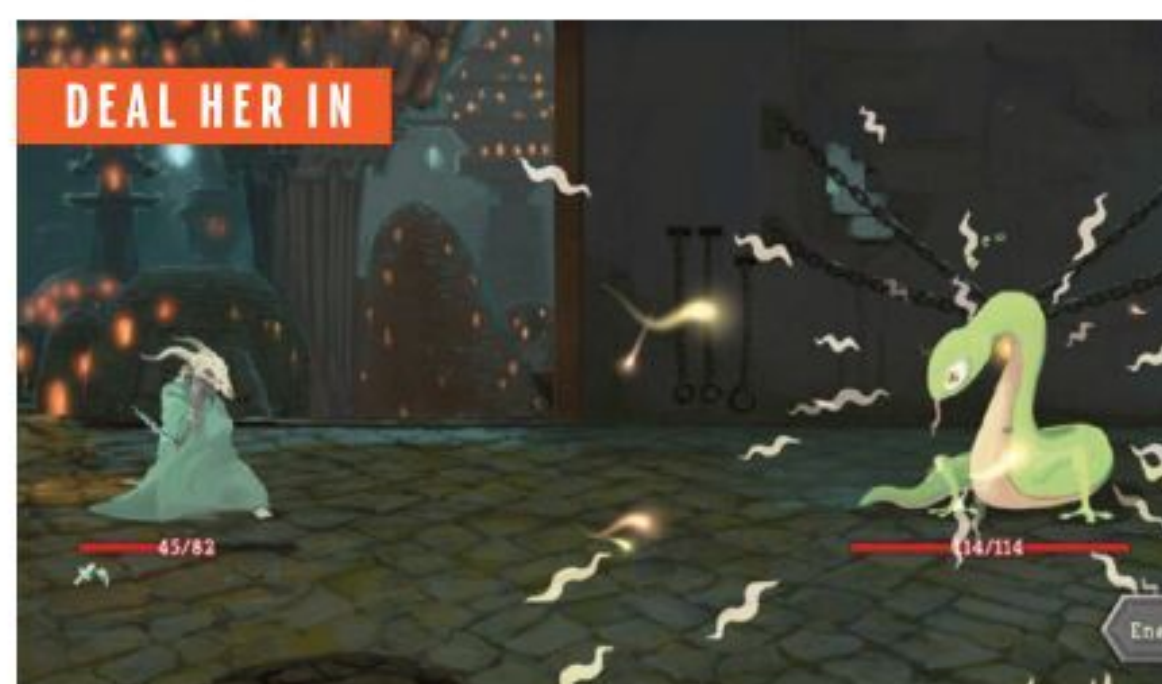
More recommendations from me? Sounds very tedious. Instead, here are eight favorites from my mother, a retiree who started playing videogames five years ago.



HER STORY

herstorygame.com

→ The game that kicked off her new hobby. With its simple interface and premise evocative of the murder mystery TV shows she loves, I was convinced she'd enjoy it—and once she gave it a go, she was hooked. Thanks to Sam Barlow for turning my mum into a gamer.



SLAY THE SPIRE

megacrit.com

→ From there, I thought card games would be a gentle ramp in to the hobby, and introduced her to *Slay the Spire*. This approach was arguably too successful—at last count she has over 2,000 hours logged, though for some reason she still mispronounces the word 'shiv'.



DISCO ELYSIUM

discoelysium.com

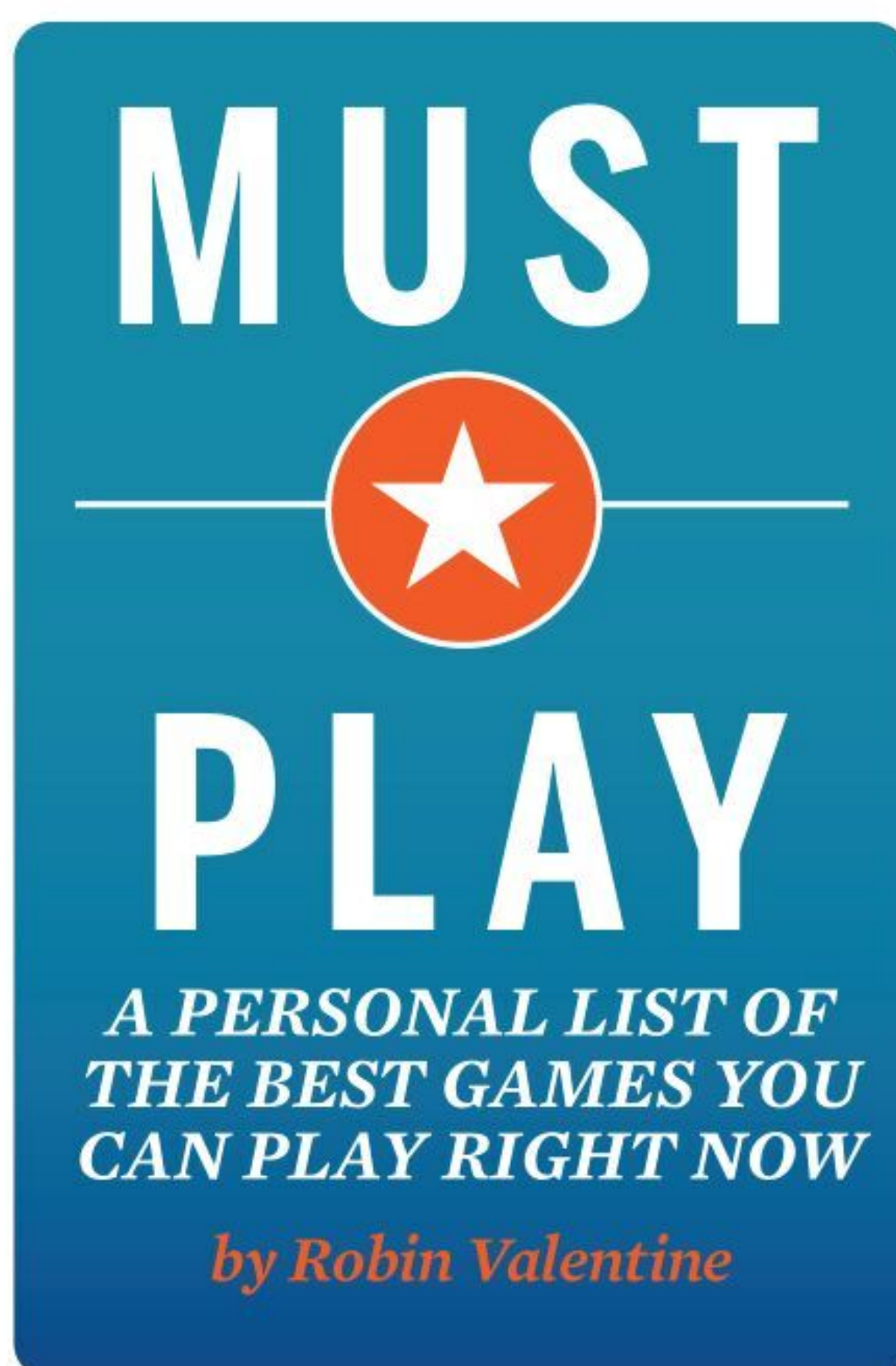
→ For her birthday one year, I bought her this game, and wrote up a simple guide for its trickier RPG elements. These days, it's her favorite game ever—despite its surreal streak, it's exactly the kind of detective work she loves, and achieves wonderful depth without being inaccessible.



RETURN OF THE OBRA DINN

obradinn.com

→ Another game she likes for its intricate mystery-solving. Usually, first-person games give her motion sickness, but the lo-fi look seemed to prevent that here—that is, until she upgraded to a proper gaming laptop, and the suddenly smoother framerate proved nauseating.



HEAVEN'S VAULT

inklestudios.com/heavensvault

→ A sci-fi adventure focused on archaeology. Mum enjoys the relaxing glides between planets, and loves the puzzles because they remind her of cryptic crosswords. Unfortunately, she keeps remembering the name as 'Heaven's Gate', which is a very different thing.



A SHORT HIKE

ashorthike.com

→ She describes this one as about "a penguin walking up a mountain", but despite the ornithological confusion, she was charmed by its low stakes adventure and adorable character designs. When I bring it up, she starts imitating the character's jerky jumps and wing flaps. Undignified.



WILMOT'S WAREHOUSE

wilmotwarehouse.com

→ Mum has always been neat and organized, and this game of warehouse micromanagement taps directly into those instincts. Perhaps a little too well—she keeps this one at arm's length, worried that she could become obsessed with it. A true gamer's dilemma.



SHERLOCK HOLMES CHAPTER ONE

sherlockholmes.one

→ Lured in by the mystery solving, she's now having to grapple with full third-person movement, an open world, and real-time combat. She praises the game's tutorializing for helping her acclimate, though we may have to turn the aim sensitivity down if she ever wants to hit anyone.

HARDWARE

GET THE BEST YOU DESERVE



100

GROUP TEST

The best all-in-one cooling systems that money can buy.



104

REVIEW

We check out the Intel Core i5 12600K, the hottest new chip around.



108

BUYER'S GUIDE

Create your perfect PC with our three expert example builds.



ALL-IN-ONE CPU COOLERS

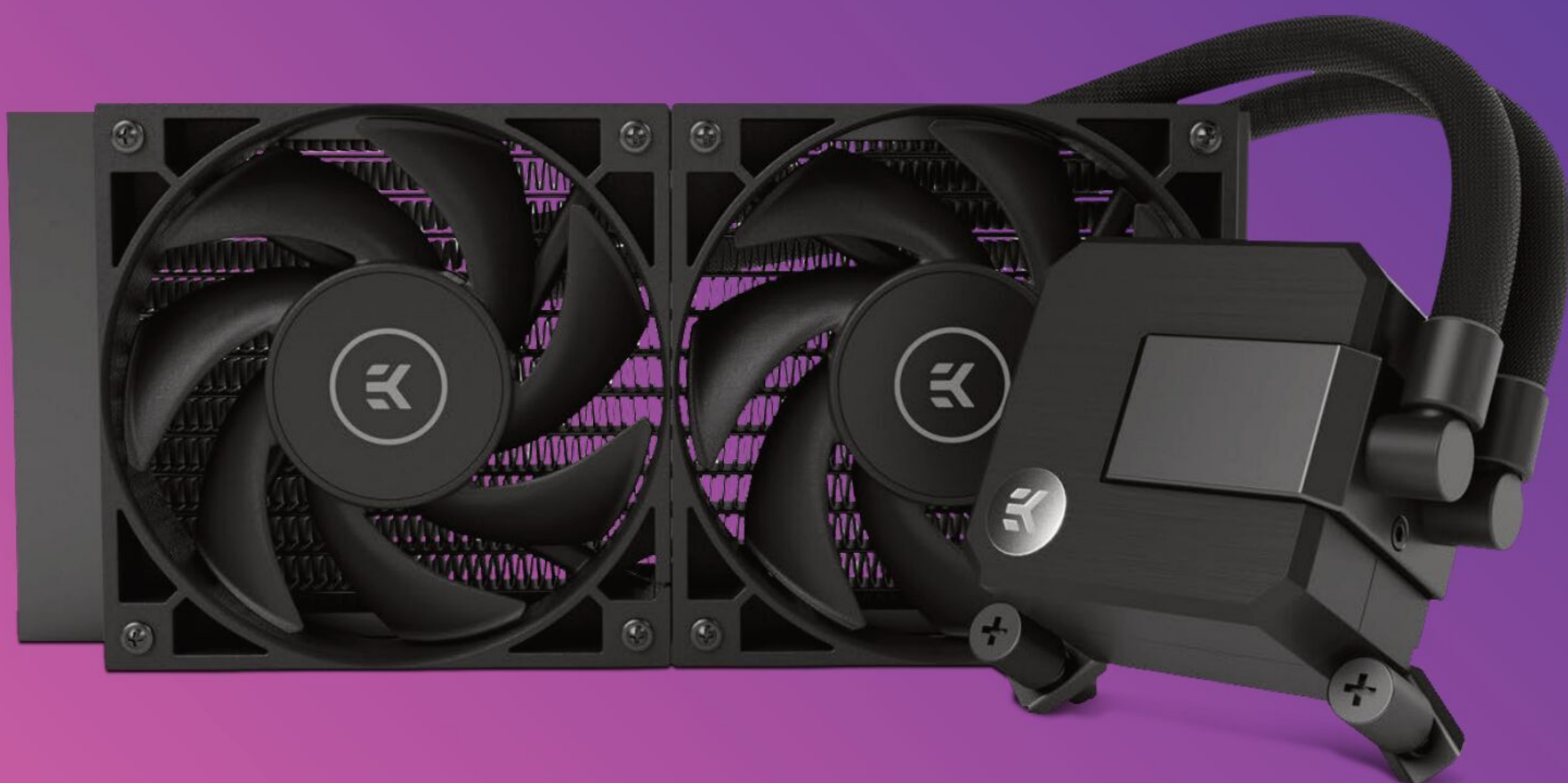
There's a liquid chip chiller out there to suit any budget, form factor, or processor. *By Chris Szewczyk*

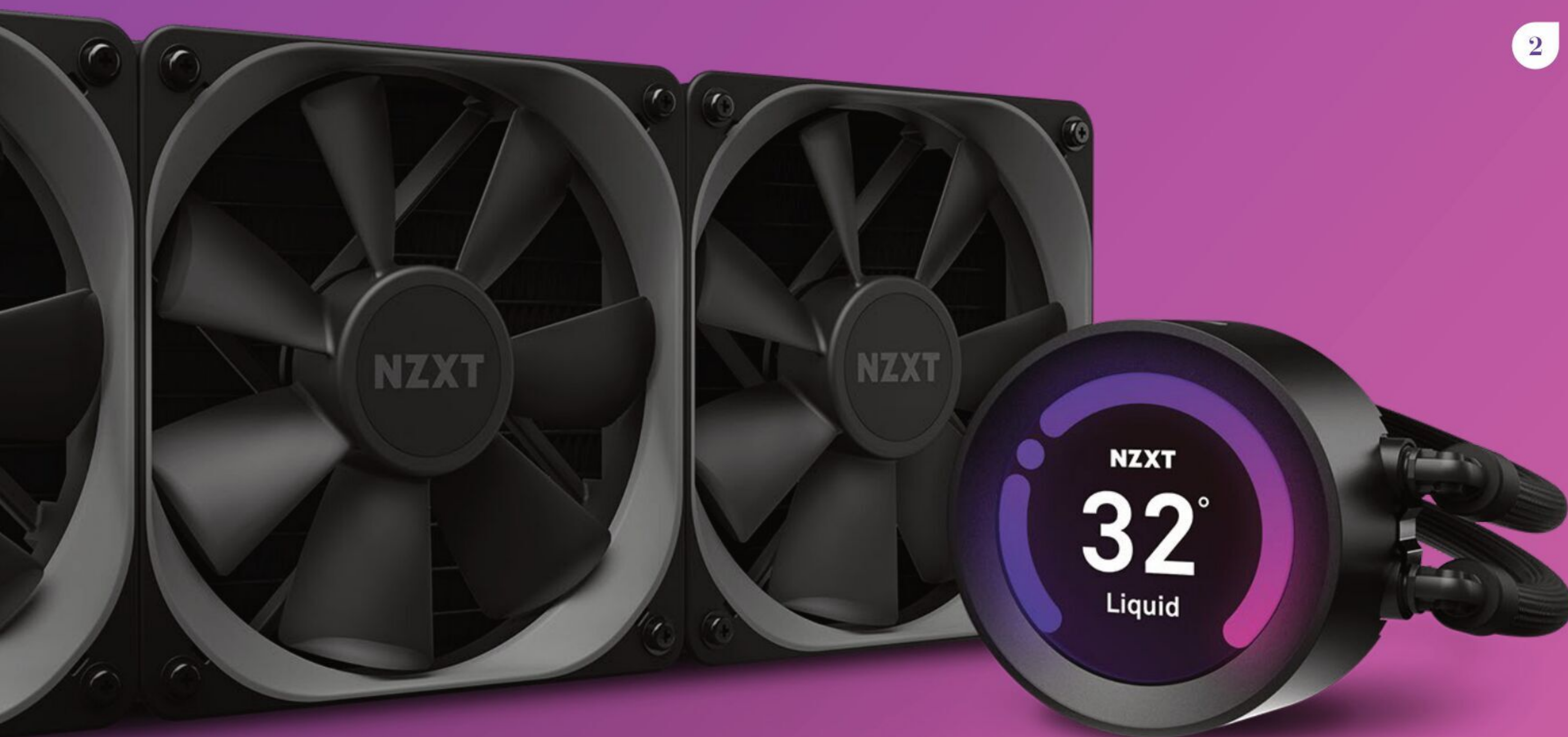
All-in-one coolers have come a long way. What was once a niche product with some dubious piping has become ubiquitous among PC builds, even edging out the humble air cooler that has served us well all these years.

There's a good reason for this: With modern silicon's dynamic performance levels, maintaining excellent cooling is more important than ever, and

a double or even triple fan liquid cooler has proven itself more than up to the task of dealing with excess heat. Though it must be said, their success may be down to the opportunity for sheer panache they offer: All-in-one coolers usually come with excessive RGB lighting.

Of course, a good quality AIO cooler ultimately comes down to its ability to keep your rig cool and quiet. But there are hundreds of coolers to choose from. Where do you begin?





AIO Basic 240

EK \$90

A step up from even the best air coolers

1 In the world of liquid cooling, EK is a name that needs little introduction. The cooling company's Basic series is a little different to its custom loops, though. It focuses on value for money—plus, it doesn't feature any RGB at all. If that sounds good to you then the EK AIO Basic 240 is well worth a look.

The EK Basic 240 really stands out thanks to its build quality. It feels hefty and well-made. Though what really impresses me is the cooling performance on offer. I find it goes very close to 360mm levels of cooling capability. It does get

noisy if you try to push an overclocked Rocket Lake CPU, but then pretty much every other cooler does too. That said, most of the time it stays essentially silent. The EK-AIO basic 240 is perfect for builds with a stealthy focus, or closed case builds where lighting doesn't matter. With its build quality and high performance, it's a cooler that you can surely set and forget, out of sight, out of mind, and out of earshot.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Nips at the heels of 360mm coolers
- Good value for money
- No RGB lighting

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1150, 1151, 1155, 1156, 1200, 2011, 2011-3, 2066, 1700; AMD AM4 / **SIZE:** 240MM / **RADIATOR DIMENSIONS:** 275MM X 120MM X 27MM / **FAN SPEEDS:** 550-2200 RPM / **NOISE LEVEL:** UP TO 33.5 DB(A)

Kraken Z73

NZXT \$285

High-end cooling with a touch of luxury

2 Sometimes only the best will do, and short of a fully custom loop, the NZXT Kraken Z73 is as close as you're going to get. It's pricey to be sure, but oh so pretty.

The highlight of the Z73 is its head mounted LCD, which displays monitoring info in conjunction with NZXT's CAM software or you can use your own custom GIFs. It adds a lot of cost to the unit, but it really does look great. Though you are giving up flashy fans for this functionality.

The Kraken Z73 can tame pretty much any chip you care to throw at it. Its fans can get loud as a result, but we don't

mind having some optional headroom for times when you want outright performance. Under normal circumstances, it is very quiet indeed.

The Kraken Z73 is pricey, no doubt about it, but it's the kind of cooler you'll want to show off. It provides great cooling performance, there's a lot of headroom for OC and you'll spend ages playing with the LCD display on the way to creating a truly unique look for your rig.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Excellent cooling ability
- Customizable pump head unit
- Expensive compared to others

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1200, 115X, 1366, 2011, 2011-3, 2066; AMD AM4, TRX40 AND TR4 / **SIZE:** 360MM / **RADIATOR DIMENSIONS:** 394MM X 121MM X 27MM / **FAN SPEEDS:** 800-2800 RPM / **NOISE LEVEL:** UP TO 36 DB(A)



**AFFORDABLE AND SHOULD
OUTPERFORM MOST
LOW-PROFILE AIR COOLERS**



GROUP TEST

3

Hydro Series H60 V2

CORSAIR \$80

Liquid cooling at air cooling prices

3 The Corsair H60 has been around for some time, though over the years it's seen many upgrades. The 120mm AIO form factor won't suit everyone, but those who require a compact cooler to suit something like an ITX build will find it can perform as well as a decent mid-range air cooler.

The H60 V2 is well suited to processors under 95W. Sure, it will be beaten out by a decent tower cooler or all-in-one with a somewhat larger radiator, but their dimensions often rule them out of SFF builds. Heat is the enemy of an SFF system, so the H60's ability to eject hot air

outside the case will benefit the whole system.

The Corsair H60 V2 is perfect for a compact system. It's affordable and should outperform most low-profile air coolers and doing so without having to resort to unreasonable noise levels. It won't suit a high core count or overclocked processor, but then you shouldn't expect it to. With the right partnering components, it's an easy recommendation.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Good performance for its small size
- Generally quiet operation
- Very affordable

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1200, 1150, 1151, 1155, 1156, 1366, 2011, 2066; AMD AM4, AM3 & AM2 / **SIZE:** 120MM / **RADIATOR DIMENSIONS:** 157MM X 120MM X 27MM / **FAN SPEEDS:** UP TO 1700 RPM / **NOISE LEVEL:** UP TO 28.3 DB(A)

TUF Gaming LC 240 ARGB

ASUS \$113

For those who want their PC to be seen but not heard

4 Asus wouldn't be the first name on most people's lips when it comes to affordability, but the TUF Gaming LC 240 offers great value for money and it's a good way to add color and capable cooling at the same time, all without having to spend a whole lot of your hard earned cash.

This cooler is similar to many others, but Asus has chosen to include fans that are tuned for low noise operation. Even when it's running at full speed, it stays very quiet, though this also means that it won't deliver the low temperatures of some other 240mm units. But unless you're

loading up a high core count processor for long periods, this won't be a concern.

If you're looking for an affordable cooler that's quiet and affordable, then the LC 240 ARGB is well worth a look. Install it and you'll forget you're even running a liquid cooler. One of the other key characteristics of the TUF brand is reliability and the LC 240 ARGB comes with a six-year warranty for that little bit of extra peace of mind.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Excellent low noise performance
- Good value for money
- Strong warranty offering

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 1200, 1150, 1151, 1152, 1156, 1366; AMD AM4 / **SIZE:** 240MM / **RADIATOR DIMENSIONS:** 272MM X 121MM X 27MM / **FAN SPEEDS:** 800 - 2000 RPM / **NOISE LEVEL:** UP TO 29.3 DB(A)

4



WHAT SHOULD I LOOK FOR IN AN ALL-IN-ONE CPU COOLER?

Perhaps the most important consideration of all is choosing an all-in-one cooler that will fit in your case. You'll need to check if your case is capable of housing a large radiator. All-in-one coolers commonly come in four sizes: 120mm, 240mm, 280mm, and 360mm. These correspond to the radiator size of the cooler, which you'll need to mount inside your case with space for the fans. You'll also want to choose a cooler that can handle the TDP of your processor. A 120mm cooler is likely a no-no with an AMD Ryzen 9 or Intel Core i9. To find out what you need, you'll want to look at the TDP of your CPU and then to a prospective cooler's specifications to see if they're going to play nicely with one another.

5



MasterLiquid ML360R RGB

COOLER MASTER \$125

An old favorite that still impresses

5 The Cooler Master MasterLiquid ML360R RGB isn't the newest cooler on the market, but it's been one of our favorites for a long time. It offers a good blend of cooling performance and ARGB good looks. It just so happens to be one of the better value RGB-having 360mm coolers on the market. What's not to like?

The ML360R comes with its own RGB controller, which is great if you hate installing too much software on your system. There might be a bit of cable spaghetti, but with some careful routing, this shouldn't be too much of a problem.

Performance-wise, the ML360R is very good, though all-in-one manufacturing has come a long way and it's no longer the class-leading performer it once was. That probably sounds too harsh, because the ML360R is no dud and it will handle a modern high core count processor with ease. It's a very good all rounder, and you'll find it offers a great blend of cooling ability, good noise levels, style and value for money.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Value for money
- Cooling performance
- Large radiator

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 20XX, 1366, 1200, 115X, 775; AMD AM4, AM3, AM2, FM2, FM1 / **SIZE:** 360MM / **RADIATOR DIMENSIONS:** 394MM X 119MM X 27.2MM / **FAN SPEEDS:** 650-2000 RPM / **NOISE LEVEL:** UP TO 30 DB(A)

6



Gammaxx L240 V2

DEEPCOOL \$65

Awesome bang for buck

6 Deepcool is well known for its capable all-in-ones at affordable prices, and the Gammaxx L240 V2 is one of the cheaper 240mm coolers on the market. That makes it a great option for users looking to step up from air cooling into the wet world of liquid.

The Gammaxx 240 is capable of cooling most processors, though like many of the chip chillers on this list it draws the line at AMD's Threadripper beasts. It keeps the rest running with remarkably low noise levels, which is one of the main reasons we recommend it. At idle the

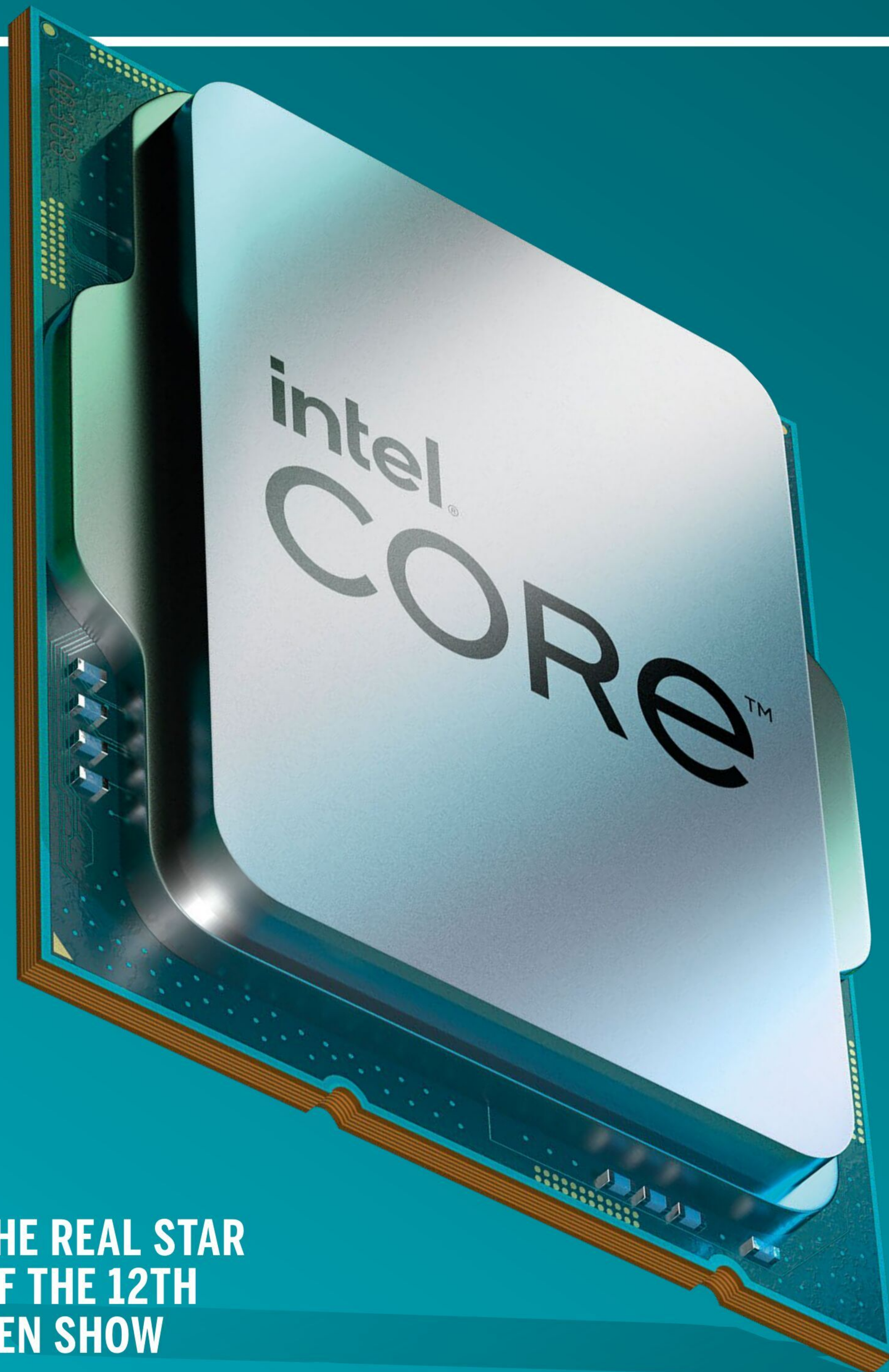
L240 is effectively silent. That said, you will start to see an increase in temperatures and noise levels with high TDP processors, especially when overclocking.

If you're after a 240mm AIO that's inexpensive and quiet under less demanding loads, the Deepcool Gammaxx L240 remains a great choice. Sure, its noise levels can get high if you push it hard, but at this price it comes highly recommended.

PC GAMER VERDICT

- Terrific value
- Good cooling ability
- Effectively silent at idle

SPECS SOCKET SUPPORT: INTEL LGA 20XX, 1366, 1200, 115X; AMD AM4, AM3, AM2, FM2, FM1 / **SIZE:** 240MM / **RADIATOR DIMENSIONS:** 280MM X 120MM X 27MM / **FAN SPEEDS:** 500-1800 RPM / **NOISE LEVEL:** UP TO 30 DB(A)



THE REAL STAR
OF THE 12TH
GEN SHOW

REVIEW

INTEL CORE i5 12600K

This impressive bit of hardware shows how a little architecture can make a big difference. *By Jacob Ridley*

The humble Core i5 is the CPU that matters most for gamers. It's cheaper than a Core i7 or Core i9, but it still offers the fundamentals of what makes those chips great for gaming. With the Core i5 12600K that's no different, though that may be understating what this chip can really do.

That's because the Core i5 12600K isn't the modest CPU you expect: It's the equivalent of the top previous-gen chip in a package that's almost half the price, at around \$290. That means it only took one generation, and less than 12 months, for Intel to take its Core i9 performance and deliver it inside a far cheaper Core i5 package. Since it's not pushing to the very limit of what Alder Lake can deliver in a single die, either, it's also a more power savvy design than the Core i9 12900K. That makes for a more well-rounded processor for mid- to high-end builds.

The Core i5 12600K really is shockingly good, and the deeper you dive into this chip's performance, the more you realize it's the real star of the 12th Gen show.

DEEP DIVE

To understand why the Core i5 12600K is so impressive, you have to first know how it's pieced together. That's because there's something fundamentally different about Alder Lake to all chips that came before it: It's a hybrid. That means it comes with two different types of processing cores: Performance cores (P-cores) and Efficient cores (E-cores).

What this means is there are two different architectures powering most 12th Gen processors: Golden Cove and Gracemont. The Golden Cove architecture aims to be something close to your traditional CPU core, built to excel at single-threaded performance and deliver high clock speeds. These are the P-cores. The Gracemont architecture is something Alder Lake borrows from the Atom lineup of low-power chips. These are built to be

power-efficient, and you can fit more of them onto a chip without taking up too much space. These are the E-cores.

That's dramatically underselling both architectures' intricacies, but it helps explain the Core i5 12600K's obscure specs. This chip comes with six P-cores and four E-cores, in what's known as a 6+4 design. That makes for a slight increase in overall core count over its predecessor, the Core i5 11600K, and more physical cores than even a Core i9 11900K.

I'll admit I wasn't always sure about these Efficient

cores. Chip designer Arm has been rolling out big.LITTLE designs for a while to great success, but targeting the mobile market where power efficiency equates to longer battery life. Intel intends to bring Alder Lake to mobile, too, so I get that angle, but on the desktop side of things, what is a cluster of small cores built out of Intel's next-gen Atom architecture going to deliver to a PC gamer like me?

I should've known it wasn't all about raw numbers, clock speeds, and single-threaded performance, however. Intel's Efficient Cores are much more than you might first imagine. For starters, these cores help increase the

multi-threaded performance, as you've simply got more cores to throw at a problem. Then, there's the ability to remove load from the P-cores in a pinch, which is really where these low-power cores come in handy for gaming. Say you're a streamer and you're trying to play a competitive title on one screen and beam your capture off to the world on the other. An Alder Lake CPU, with a little help from Windows 11, should be able to divvy up this workload in order to keep your P-cores focussed on delivering gaming framerates and your E-cores on streaming over the web.

Therein lies some of Alder Lake's magic, but there's more to getting all of these architectures working together than simply placing them all on one chip. A large part of Intel's Alder Lake performance comes from utilizing these two different cores in an effective manner. To do that it uses something called the Thread Director. This helps your OS decide which tasks should go to which cores, by handing your OS more information than it would otherwise have available to it.

Now, granted, a processor with a straight 16-cores, such as the Ryzen 9 5950X, is able to manage multiple workloads just too, but Alder Lake does have a few more tricks up its sleeve.

The most significant is DDR5. For a long while we've been happily plodding along with DDR4-powered machines, and these have started to hit incredible speeds, but times are a-changin'. DDR5 is already setting the bar higher for memory frequencies and performance, and Alder Lake is ready to meet it.

DDR5 kits do, however, come with generally higher price tags than DDR4. Unfortunately, that's the reality of a

>>

SPECS

EXPECT TO PAY:
\$290

THREADS:
16

L3 CACHE (SMART
CACHE):
20MB

L2 CACHE:
9.5MB

GRAPHICS:
UHD Graphics 770

MEMORY SUPPORT
(UP TO):
DDR5 4800MT/s, DDR4
3200MT/s

CORE STRENGTH

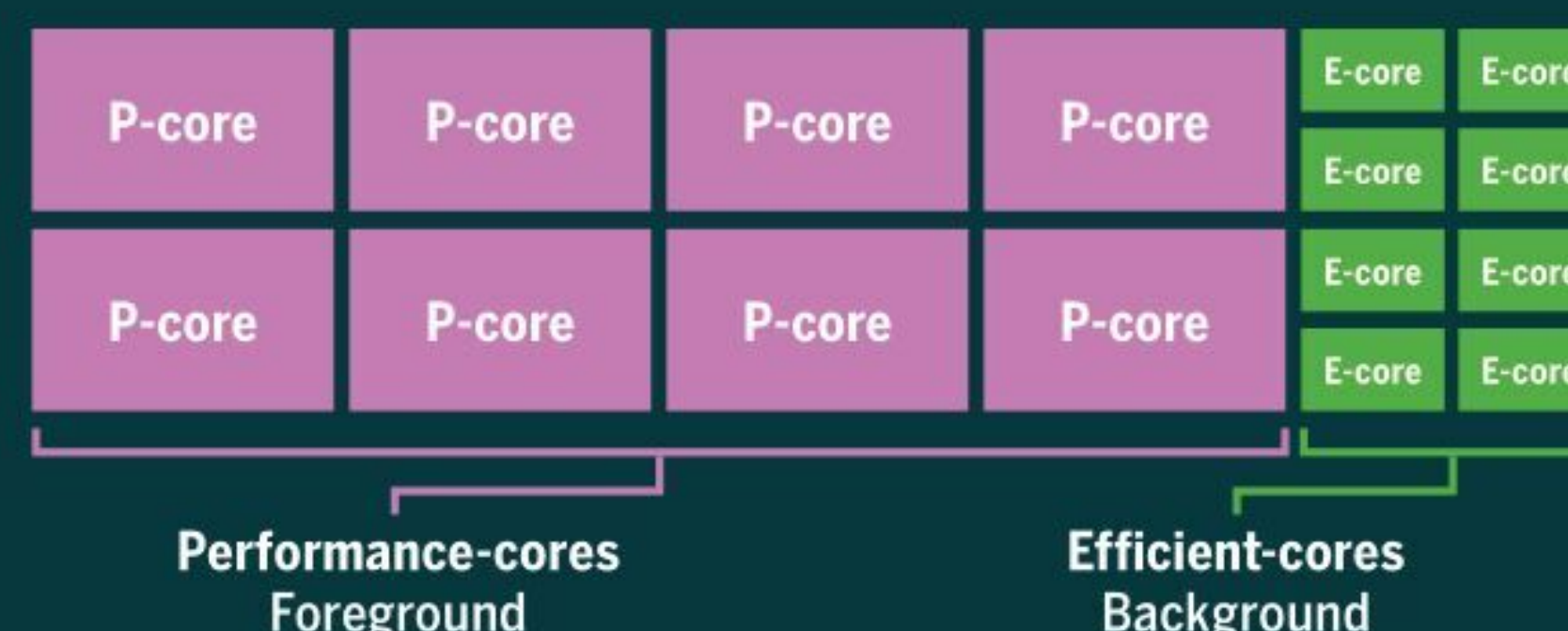
What's a core for?

PERFORMANCE CORES

- Fast
- Low latency
- Best for gaming and intensive workloads

EFFICIENT CORES

- Small footprint
- Power efficient
- Best for multithreaded applications and some background tasks



THE INTEL CORE I5 12600K IS ONE HELLUVA GAMING CHIP

» brand new technology such as this coming to market, perhaps especially so because of the ongoing global shortages affecting all manner of chips. On the plus side, you can buy a DDR4 compatible motherboard and skip over the burgeoning DDR5 market altogether. Though do bear in mind that you are stuck with one or the other. So make your pick and be prepared to live with it for the rest of your chip's life. Or until you buy a new motherboard.

PERFORMANCE LEAP

The Intel Core i5 12600K is one helluva gaming chip. It skips through our benchmarking suite with relative ease, and only just falls behind the top-tier Core i9 12900K in a few games. When considering the competition, it crushes AMD's Ryzen 5 5600X, though it's at its most impressive when it's storming ahead of the Core i9 11900K.

It's enough to beat the Ryzen 5 5600X, which is a chip we're very fond of here, but it's another thing altogether for this chip to run circles around the

Core i9 11900K. In terms of CPU package power, the Core i5 12600K is a far less power-hungry processor than the Core i9 11900K, too, despite being faster in almost every way. It's still not quite a match for AMD's Ryzen 5 5600X in terms of power efficiency, which is testament to the overall efficiency of AMD's Ryzen 5000-series. That's the same story with the high-end Core i9 12900K, too—Intel just can't seem to nail down the efficiency that AMD is able to deliver.

Aside from gaming, the Core i5 12600K can dispatch a video editing job without breaking much of a sweat. The multithreaded performance from its many cores, some of which are E-cores, is wholly impressive—proof that those E-cores aren't weak sauce when it comes to demanding compute tasks.

Generally, though, the Core i5 12600K is a fantastic gaming chip through and through, and it's a prime example of what Intel can deliver when it's not chasing AMD's coat tails. It's roughly priced the same as AMD's

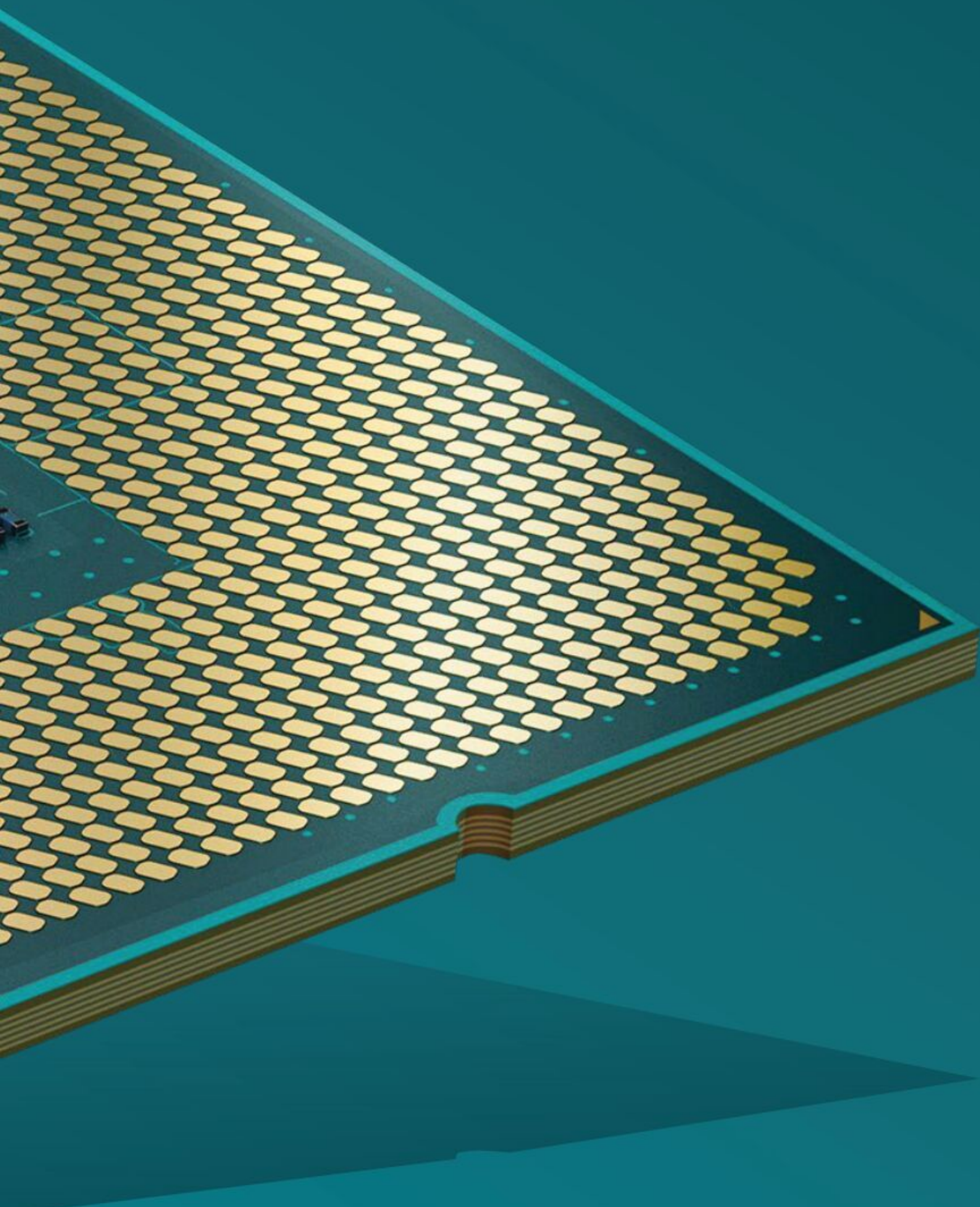
ABOVE: The right chip can make a world of difference.

chip, perhaps a touch pricier in practice, but it offers an entirely different class of performance with reasonable power demands.

NEXT-GEN

AMD has its work cut out following the release of the Core i5 12600K, and that's great news for PC builders. Intel's mid-range hasn't felt quite so at a loss as its high-end chips have these past generations, with chips such as the Core i5 11600K being one of our favorites in recent years, but the Core i5 12600K really takes those agreeable Core i5 qualities and turns them up to 11. Or rather, 12.

Also, in as much as the Intel Core i5 12600K isn't only a mighty chip on its own, it's also the keys to a whole next-gen platform. DDR5 and PCIe 5.0 SSDs are all extravagant luxuries for now, but the Core i5 12600K's clever balance of price and performance makes the entire 12th Gen platform a little more digestible if you're not prepared to spend thousands of dollars.



There is still the question of platform costs, though, and that's probably my biggest concern with the 12th Gen today. Compatible motherboards with the new Z690 chipset are pricey, and especially so when compared to the AM4 platform that AMD's Ryzen processors work with.

Yet in offering the same performance, if not better, than the top Intel processor in early 2021—Rocket Lake came out in March, people—for nearly half the cost, Intel has won me over with the Core i5 12600K.

INTEL'S BACK

The Core i5 12600K is the best CPU for gaming right now, if you're in any way a sensible person. I'm not a sensible person and I'd want the Core i9 12900K or Ryzen 9 5950X just because, but if you really boil it down to price to performance, performance per watt, and sense check yourself for just a moment, the Core i5 12600K is the chip that comes out on top. There's some glimmer of hope that Intel may

be able to deliver enough of this chip for its price to stick around, and that means we might finally have a piece of gaming hardware that actually appears to be a good deal. With the state of graphics cards right now, even suggesting that feels wrong. But it's true, the Core i5 12600K is a good deal. The biggest concern remains the platform costs, but given some decently priced Z690 motherboards, and the release of cheaper Alder Lake chips next year, those might drop with a little more time.

With that said, it remains that the Core i5 12600K is a high-end chip masquerading as a mid-range hero, and doing a great job of it. Place it at the center of your next gaming PC, and you wouldn't be putting a foot wrong. ■

PC GAMER VERDICT

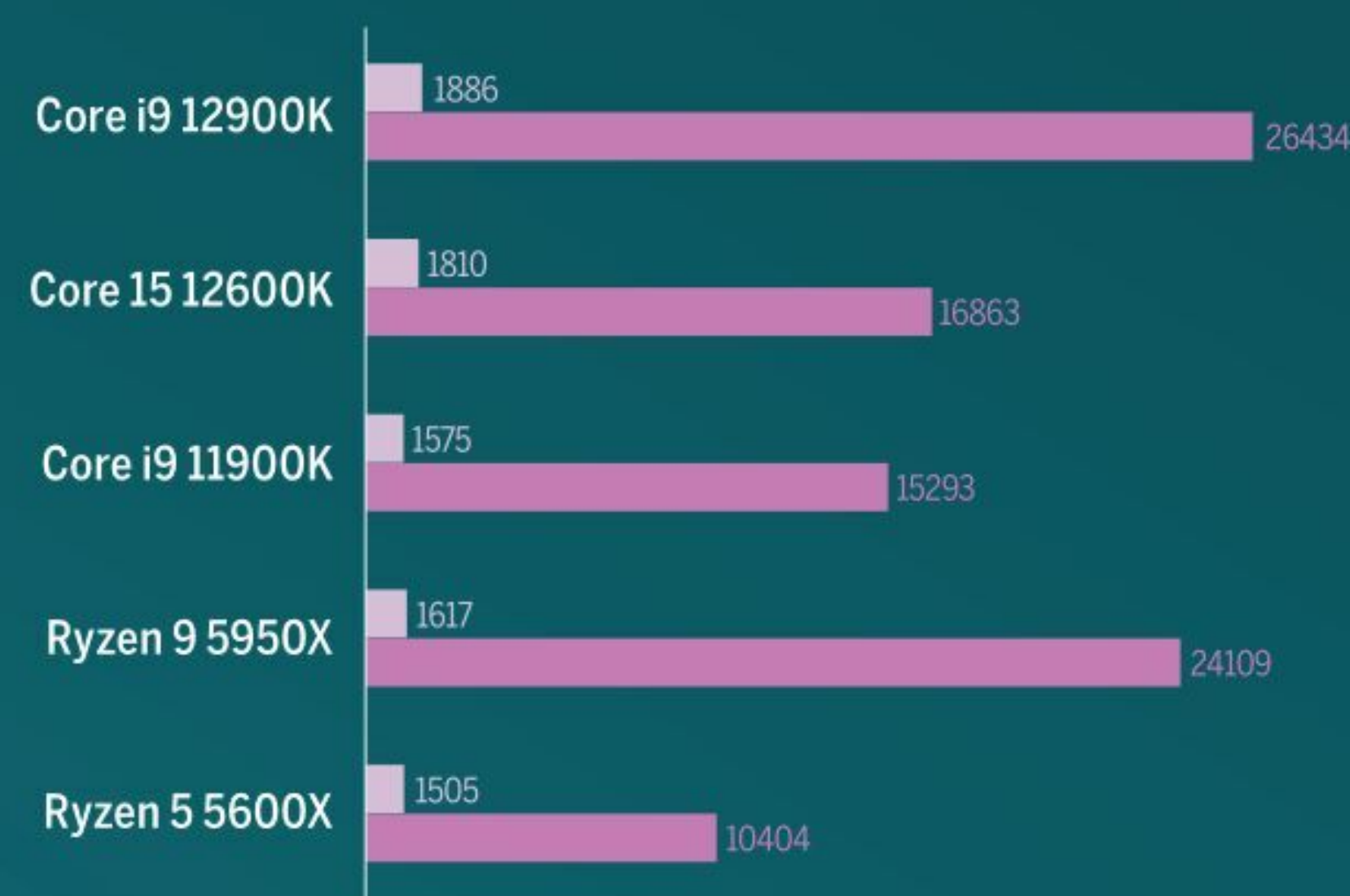
Faster and more efficient than its predecessors, this is simply the best CPU available for PC gaming in 2022.

94

BENCHMARKS

CINEBENCH R23

■ Single core ■ Multi core



CPU PACKAGE POWER

■ Idle ■ Peak wattage



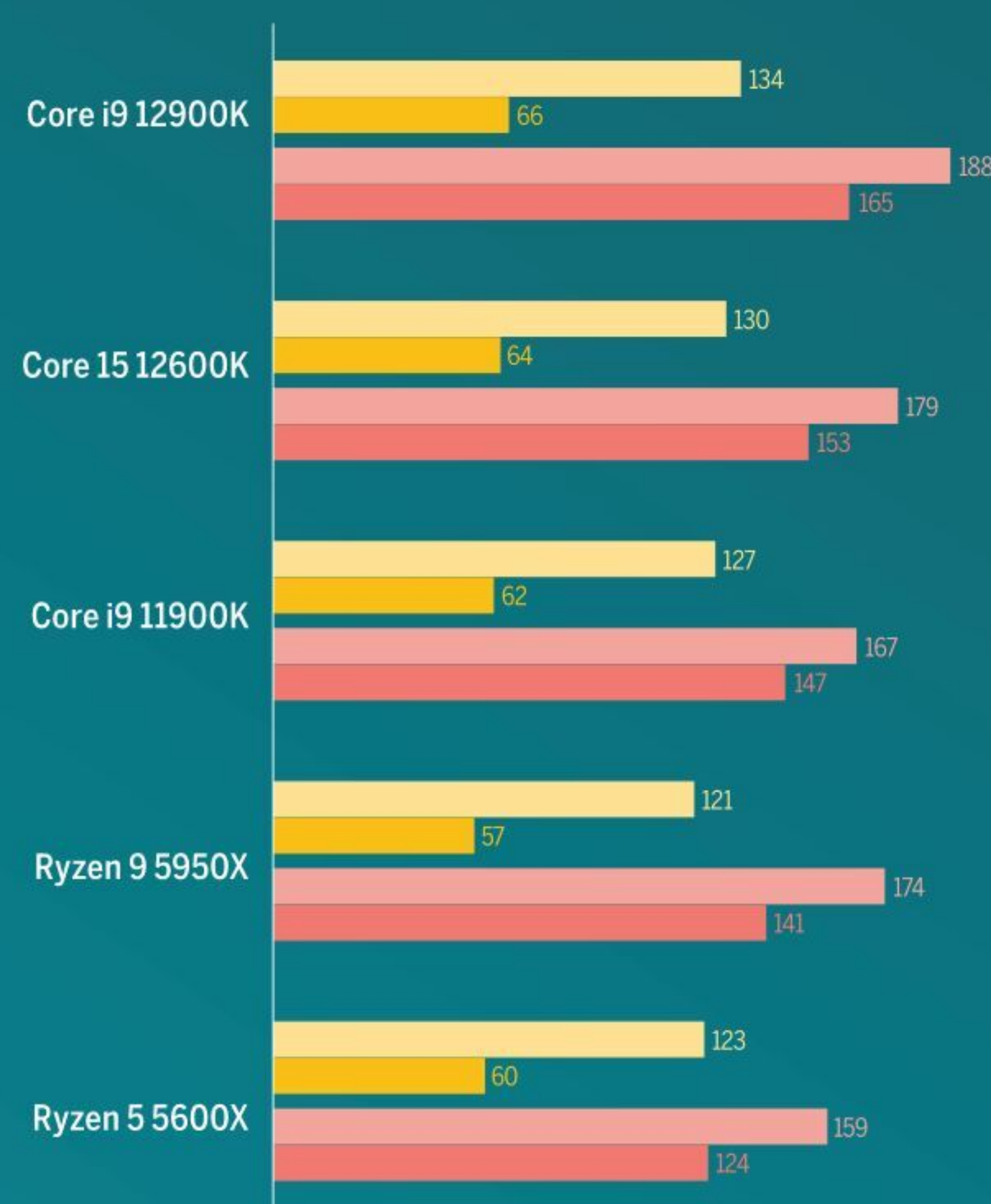
GAMING PERFORMANCE

Metro Exodus (DX12), Ultra, 1080p

■ Average (fps) ■ Minimum (fps)

F1 2021 (DX12), Ultra, 1080p

■ Average (fps) ■ Minimum (fps)



BUYER'S GUIDE

Build the best PC for your budget



KEY

Budget build

PC gaming is for everyone. Pick the parts you want to build a new, well-rounded PC for a good price.

Mid-range build

You want to run every new game at 1080p 60fps. This recommended build will see you through.

Advanced build













You're looking for the best PC on the market and superior components. But you still want to spend smart.

BUDGET BUILD

Enjoy 1080p gaming without breaking the bank



TOTAL
\$816









MOTHERBOARD		B550 Gaming X AM4 Gigabyte \$99 This motherboard offers two display outs to support our choice of chip, while also delivering a modest selection of USB ports.
PROCESSOR		Ryzen 5 5600G AMD \$239 This is a little pricier than we'd like, but it's one of few viable budget options that avoids a discrete graphics card for gaming.
GRAPHICS CARD		None This build is tailored to today's GPU shortage. But don't fret, once cards are back in stock, you could slot one in to this PC for an upgrade.
COOLER		Wraith Stealth AMD Free with CPU The Wraith Stealth is a great cooler made even better by the fact it comes free with our choice of chip. Budget heaven.
MEMORY		Vegeance LPX 8GB (2x 4GB) DDR4-3000 Corsair \$65 For gaming we only really need 8GB of RAM, and this stuff is quick to boot.
POWER SUPPLY		MWE White 400W Cooler Master \$48 Small by today's standards, this PSU from a trusty manufacturer offers plenty of juice for this build and a little more.
SSD		MX500 500GB Crucial \$54 One of the best value SATA SSDs you can buy, and plenty fast enough for a snappy OS.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital \$43 You don't need a HDD, so feel free to cut this to save cash, but one sure helps if you're a virtual hoarder.
CASE		Neos BitFenix \$65 You'll want to minimize how often you rebuild your PC, so make sure to give it a good home. This case'll do nicely.
DISPLAY		GW2280 BenQ \$113 A 1080p60 VA monitor will see you through in style and, once you upgrade, will make a superb second monitor.
KEYBOARD		G213 Logitech \$60 It may be a membrane switch board, but it's stylish, and well-built. Sometimes that's worth more than cheap clicky switches.
MOUSE		G102 Logitech \$30 A classic shape delivered in a sleek shell, this mouse fits all hand sizes and grips. A solid option for the money.

MID-RANGE BUILD

Our recommended build for playing the latest games



TOTAL
\$1,547

MOTHERBOARD		TUF Gaming B560M-Plus WiFi Asus \$150 We didn't want to go too cheap on the motherboard, as plenty of USB ports and WiFi go a long way.
PROCESSOR		Core i5 11400 Intel \$190 Intel's 11th Gen was at its best on a budget, and that's why this six-core/12-thread processor is a great fit for this build.
GRAPHICS CARD		GeForce RTX 3060 Ti Founders Ed. Nvidia \$399 The RTX 3060 Ti is a little overkill, but we're willing to make sacrifices elsewhere to make it work.
COOLER		Freezer 34 Esports Arctic \$35 This is a great compact cooler, though for a little more you can buy a version with two fans for better performance.
MEMORY		Ballistix 16GB DDR4 (2x8GB) Crucial \$80 With plenty of capacity at 16GB, this unembellished memory has everything you need for gaming and more.
POWER SUPPLY		CX650M Corsair \$108 The heart of your gaming PC is your PSU, and this 650W Corsair promises to keep your rig ticking nicely.
SSD		S70 1TB Addlink \$44 Building on a budget doesn't mean sacrificing speed—the Addlink S70 proves you can indeed have both.
HDD		WD Blue 1TB 7200rpm Western Digital \$43 Just like in the budget build, this HDD isn't strictly necessary, but for a pretty low price it's nice to have plenty of extra space.
CASE		Eclipse P400S TG Phanteks \$90 An ATX case is all you need for this build. We like this one because it's simple, functional, and really nice to look at.
DISPLAY		AOC G2590FX AOC \$236 Everything a PC gamer could want: 144Hz refresh rate, 1ms response time, and it's AMD FreeSync and Nvidia G-Sync compatible.
KEYBOARD		Alloy FPS HyperX \$97 As the name suggests, this keyboard is built like an absolute tank, with a steel frame and Cherry MX switches.
MOUSE		Model O- Glorious \$75 Lightweight and responsive, the Model O- has made a name for itself among streamers and pros thanks to its clever design.

ADVANCED BUILD

Go above and beyond with a PC powerful enough to end worlds



TOTAL
\$4,576

MOTHERBOARD

**MPG Z690 Carbon WiFi**MSI **\$400**

This MSI motherboard offers a mix of high-end features, plentiful ports, and DDR5 support, without an extreme price tag.

PROCESSOR

**Core i9 12900K**Intel **\$620**

Intel's Core i9 12900K represents Alder Lake's finest chip, and it's one hell of a processor for whatever you might throw at it.

GRAPHICS CARD

**GeForce RTX 3080 Ti Founders Ed**Nvidia **\$1,199**

The RTX 3080 Ti is the latest flagship graphics card from Nvidia, but savvy builders may prefer the RTX 3080.

COOLER

**Kraken X63**NZXT **\$150**

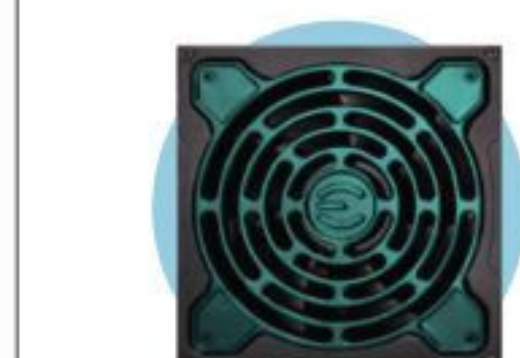
One of the most stunning AIO coolers rebuilt with an updated pump and, of course, RGB lighting for more pizzazz.

MEMORY

**Dominator Platinum RGB 32GB**Corsair **\$340**

A new memory standard for a new era of memory speed. The Dominator Platinum RGB 32GB is blisteringly quick.

POWER SUPPLY

**SuperNOVA 1000 G5 Gold**EVGA **\$214**

This caliber of gaming PC draws a lot of power. Thankfully, this PSU can handle it with high efficiency.

SSD

**WD Black SN850 1TB**Western Digital **\$229**

Though technically this platform supports PCIe 5.0, for now we're sticking with WD's PCIe 4.0 speeds with the SN850.

HDD

**860 QVO 2TB**Samsung **\$243**

Built on QLC flash memory, it's not the quickest storage around, but it's a speedy alternative to a HDD.

CASE

**600C**Corsair **\$149**

If you're going big on parts, you should grab a case that has plenty of room for upgrades down the line. This one will do just fine.

DISPLAY

**Nitro XV273K**Acer **\$650**

This one's an easy choice—4K and 144Hz for under \$1,000 is an offer we can't refuse, and neither should you.

KEYBOARD

**G915 Lightspeed**Logitech **\$245**

Low-profile mechanical switches are just the icing on the cake that is the superb, wireless Logitech G915.

MOUSE

**G502 Lightspeed**Logitech **\$137**

With a lengthy battery life and a phenomenal sensor to keep you gaming at your best, the G502 is undoubtedly one of the finest.

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DARKEST SOUL

Mysterious items looted from the desk of a particularly hollow magazine editor



Bathing Hunter Idol



When the writers of this land lost their minds, they turned to the reclining form of a hero of Rivia, but even he could not save them.

Curative Gel



Intoxicant slime bottled during an everlasting plague. May serve as a protective salve, but take care not to drink it as you would a potion.

Mysterious Cube



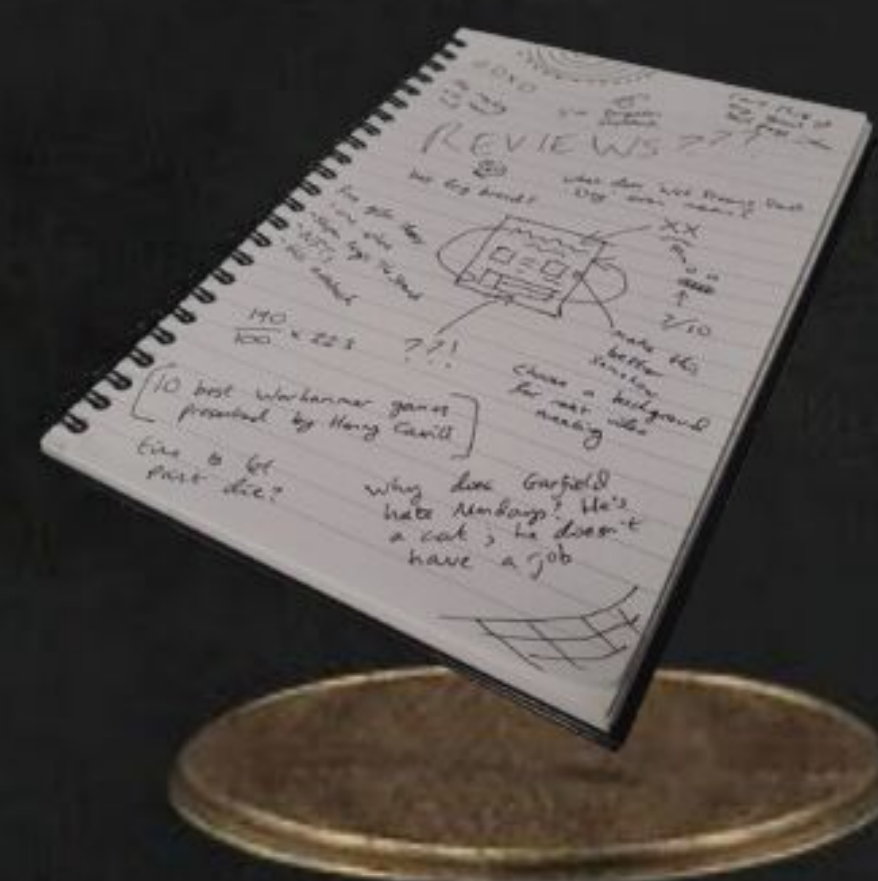
An intricate mechanism used by a simple man to keep his mind occupied. Might be used to briefly distract a bored child.

Tower of Softness



Only a man tormented by the liquid of his own nose could require such a heaped supply of ephemeral handkerchiefs.

Distressing Notebook



The curse of deadlines turned men's brains to soup. They scrawled to regain their sanity. The paper smells of ash and sweat.

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